



**BROTHER OF  
SHADOWS...  
AND SON OF  
THE LIGHT**

**By Susan Matthews**



**illustrated by  
Suzan Lovett**



BROTHER OF SHADOWS...AND SON OF THE LIGHT is intended solely for the enjoyment of fans of British media fantasy and science fiction, particularly in the genre of BLAKE'S 7. Letters of comment are both encouraged and welcomed. Correspondence requiring a reply should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. All correspondence will be considered for publication unless clearly noted otherwise, and should be addressed to OSIRIS Publications, 8928 North Olcott Avenue, Morton Grove, Illinois 60053.

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FROM THE AUTHOR:

Joy has very kindly offered me this space in which to remark upon Life, the Universe, and Everything (trusting soul that she is). I appreciate the opportunity to say good-bye and best wishes to you all. You see, a little more than a year ago -- when I was finishing the first draft of this story -- I realized that, with "Brother of Shadows" completed, my heart just wasn't in media fandom writing any longer. All of the fan-stories I'd had in me were finished; B7, Star Wars, Escape from New York, all done. This, then, is at once the most recent B7 story I have written and the last derivative fiction I mean to write. I'd like to try to sell a non-derivative piece, now; but first I have to write one.

Twelve years in print as a fan-writer means twelve years of being edited. Seldom has the process been as painless as Joy made it; an ideal editor, Joy presented me with a manuscript that was exactly as I had written it -- only better. I know that any of you who write will understand how delightful an experience that is. My sincere thanks to Joy for her editorial skill and sensitivity, not to mention the time and trouble she has taken to present my story so beautifully.

This story may not be fun, but I hope that you enjoy it.

Cheers,

*Susan R. Matthews*

Susan scribens  
January 10, 1989



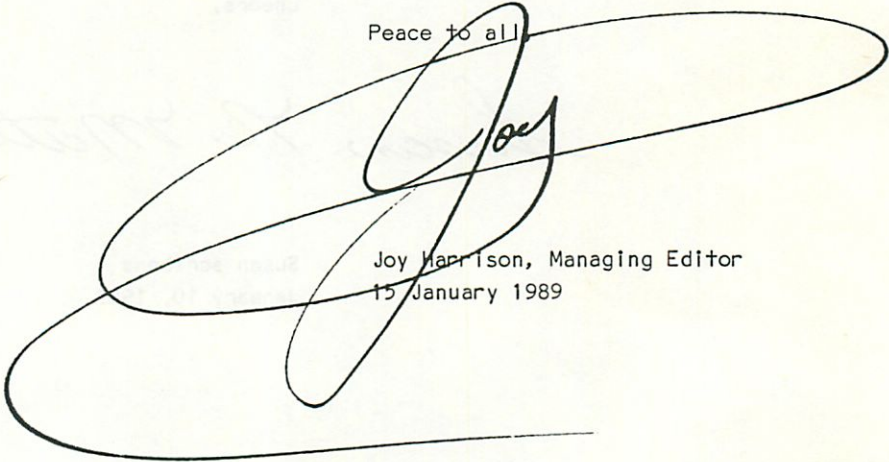
FROM THE EDITOR:

The story you are about to read is not a "kind and gentle" tale. It is a story of courage and determination -- and, yes, of loyalty, too. It is disturbing, frightening, shockingly violent, and highly provocative. It is not a story for the weak; it contains scenes of such graphic violence that even the strongest may flinch. It begins with a familiar premise and goes on to unhesitatingly explore a man's deepest fears; in the end, it becomes a triumph of his will, although at terrible cost.

Susan Matthews and Suzan Lovett are two of the finest talents I have encountered in more than ten years in fandom. Susan tells one of the most moving -- and unsettling -- stories I have read in years. And Suzan brings that story vividly to life with her incredibly apt and hauntingly symbolic illustrations. Together, they have created something even Terry Nation might envy.

When I asked Susan if she would like to write any comments to introduce this story, I did not expect anything like the kind words she had to say about her editor. On behalf of the entire OSIRIS Publications staff, I am honoured that she chose us to publish her last media-derived story. We will all miss her story-telling talent and her writing skills. We wish her the very best in both her life and her professional endeavours -- and we fully expect to see a great deal of her work in the bookstores!

Peace to all



Joy Harrison, Managing Editor  
15 January 1989



BROTHER OF SHADOWS...AND SON OF THE LIGHT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUZAN LOVETT

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This is the way of it, how it happened. I am Wisdom and Foresight, and I sit upon his shoulder, and I know.

## BROTHER OF SHADOWS...AND SON OF THE LIGHT

A Novel by Susan Matthews

Commissioner Sleer stepped down into the smoking pit that had once been part of a substantial installation, placing her feet carefully, her footing somehow secure even in the extravagant heels she wore. The security troops were hauling away the wreckage, and the bodies lay face-up on stretchers, waiting for her to identify them and approve before they were destroyed. She paced the row of corpses thoughtfully. Vila, Dayna, Soolin, Tarrant...

She paused for a long moment of consideration at the foot of the body of the man who had been Tarrant. There were two stretchers left, no further bodies; the troops were still sorting through the smoking rubble of plaster and burnt flesh in the centre of the room, seeking the right bodies. There were Federation corpses a-plenty, and a heap of dissociated limbs kept growing at the head of the row of stretchers as the clean-up party tossed the hopelessly jumbled remains in one place for eventual cremation.

In all that place, no one was left alive, no one. The outlaws had been shot early, had fallen before the explosion sent jagged steel and bloody girders flying like a great fragmentation grenade set on "Gehenna." Their bodies had been uncovered whole, undisturbed, only the trauma that killed them marking their flesh.

The Commissioner didn't care. Troops were expendable. And more than just these would be dead before sunset, if she were cheated of her prize. She would purge the entire command for its failure, and to cover her own disgrace.

The Subcommander with her didn't know. It wasn't important that Subcommander Weyran know. And Weyran already knew better than to question his commander. So if the Commissioner wished to stand ankle-deep in blood and bits of flesh, Subcommander Weyran was content to stand with her and watch the work unfold.

The troops had been at this for more than an hour, more than an hour on top of a long, hard battle to take possession of this place, a battle won by default alone, as the explosion had carried off most of the Federation troops -- and all of their opponents -- at the last. But none dared to slacken or seem tired, not under the hard, merciless eye of Sleer. They had finally reached near-bottom of the tangle of bones and blood, the middle of the floor, what had to have been the source of whatever it was that touched off the explosion.

The bodies here were, paradoxically, less mutilated, instead of more; and as the troops carried the corpses away, the faces were so clear and clean that they could easily be matched to who they had been. Lee Janisprice, a local dispatcher, suspected rebel. Denny, the controller, also a suspected rebel, frozen for infinity -- or until the fires of the incinerator melted his face away -- in a poignant expression of confusion, grief, and vindicated sorrow.



Down here, finally, down in the pit, the rubble cleared away and the bodies removed, there were only two corpses yet to examine. Sler moved in dainty, precise steps across the cratered waste of what had been the outer communications station, to be closer to the place, closer to her goal, and the technicians paused when they saw her coming, waiting to see what might be her will and pleasure.

Two bodies, and all the rest cleared away. One all but atop the other, and face down, but, oh, she knew that set of shoulders.

She pointed at the other corpse instead. "That one."

The technicians obediently moved to raise the body, shoving the other aside in the eagerness to present her with the chosen corpse for her examination. There was a momentary break in their activity, waiting for the litter to be brought up; but all her attention was on the other body, the last remaining body, now face-up in what scattered bits of refuse and debris had been too small for the removal crews to bother with.

She could have him preserved cryogenically, a statue made of ice. She could have his corpse dismembered, perhaps...

She had yet to decide how best to deal with him, now that he was dead, now that he had finally gone beyond her power to take and hold and manage him.

The litter arrived; they brought the body to her feet. Roj Blake, most like. She'd need the forensic specialists to verify -- no chances, and the Administration knew there had been negotiations with the Clone Masters, the Administration would demand proof it was the man himself, not some genetic construct.

She nodded her head, gestured with her hand, and they bore the stretcher off to where the other bodies lay awaiting their ultimate disposition. The back-up team, the one gathered over the last body, seemed disturbed about something. They would never tell her unless she forced their honesty; they were all afraid of her. It was as it should be, but sometimes, it interfered with her operations.

"Well? Bring him to me."

She knew her voice would carry, and was confident they would read every line of the imperious demanding message she encoded in her words. Do it now. Do not make me wait. Do not trouble me with qualifications. Just do it, immediately.

Two of the technicians took the body -- took his body, took Avon's body -- by the upper arms, seeming to her somehow to be horribly reluctant to touch him. Surely it was not that he was disfigured. That would not give her technicians pause, not after the past hours' work.

They dragged the body across the floor to her, slowly, for all the world as if they thought there was something in that corpse to hurt.

"This man is still alive, Commissioner."

The technician's claim was hardly to be believed -- but they would not dare lie to her. "With all due, and deepest, respect, ma'am, request permission to leave him lie until the litter



comes."

They stood at attention as well as they could, supporting the body of the man between them; it was as if Kerr Avon knelt to her -- an agreeable conceit. "Alive, you say?"

It was better than she had hoped for, an unexpected bit of good fortune. She took his head between her hands and tilted his face up, so she could examine him.

She had not seen him for months, not since she had tricked him so completely out of his gain of Zerok gold. There was no mistaking him, all the same -- the stone-hard edge of his upper lip, all the more poignant with his jaw slack in his stupor, the dusty lines of his face that marked his eyes for a man who knew the skill of staring unkind Fate and grim causality in the cold serpent-lidded face without blinking. Was he so beautiful in spite of his weakened, injured, wounded state -- or because she had him helpless in her trap?

She could examine the problem later. For the moment, it was good enough to know he belonged to her, now and forever.

His head was impossibly heavy; she felt her hands were childishly weak and small against his throat and chin. But then, Avon had always made her achingly aware of the fact that he was male and men were different. He didn't look alive, not under the flat light, and there was so much blood...

It was the right side of his face, lacerated. His right eye. His hair was filthy with blood; he'd lain on his injured side.

"Yes, ma'am, he's breathing. There's an erratic heartbeat. Will the Commissioner be wanting him alive for questioning, or should we put him with the others?"

Of course, she had the option; she could let him die. Lay him out on a stretcher with the others, lock the place up for a few days, and he would certainly be dead before too long. But since beneficent Fate had given her this unexpected prize, she would have to be a fool did she not realize how good an opportunity it was for her to gain both personal gratification and professional advancement at one time.

"Let the body down," she decided. "Gently, gently. This man can be redeemed. I'm sure of it."

Yes, now that he lay at her feet, she could see the hesitant movement of his belly, the minute pulse of his throat. If she had not known, she would have believed she imagined it, so faint and so uncertain was the sign. "Where is the doctor?"

"Coming immediately, ma'am."

Yes, she would keep him, she would let him live. For now. That he should be alive, after all this, the sole survivor of this massacre...

The doctor, kneeling, ran swift, practiced hands the length of Avon's body, then stood up again, meeting Sleer's eye with a respectful bow. "He can be healed," the man said. "Broken bones, probable internal injuries, possible brain damage, probable damage to sensory apparatus. Permission to treat the prisoner, ma'am?"



"Oh, take good care of him," she agreed, not caring if she sounded insincere. Or too sincere. "Do what must be done to save his life. But do no more than that, not without my personal knowledge. Am I understood?"

A dead man was of no use, and a dying man too frequently counted upon the end to come, and was less useful accordingly. A man in health and in control she had failed to manipulate correctly, more than once. But a man in pain, a man impaired? She had great hope of Avon's good behaviour, given the fact that she could decide how well he was to be allowed to heal.

"I'll bring the report myself, Commissioner, if I may," the doctor promised.

She waved them all away, trying not to let her eye become distracted by the tempting image of Kerr Avon's broken body laid on a stretcher and carried out of her sight.

She could afford to decline to gloat over him for now.

She would have all the time she wanted with him. Later.

\* \* \* \* \*

Strait webbed in iron coils of medical apparatus as if the dreaming prey of a great steel spider, the body of the man lay naked and impotent in the stasis field. Commissioner Sleer gloated over the precious image even as she quizzed the doctor, neutral of eye and tone, about the case and the patient's condition. "Prognosis is good, you say? There will be no brain damage?"

He shrugged diffidently, but Sleer had no attention to spare for him. The image was too precious, was too lovely -- Avon's long, white limbs, his pale skin, the long, hard, corded muscle of his thighs, the powerful containment of his shoulders -- subordinate to her, at last, not even conscious unless she should will it.

"There is never a one hundred percent certainty, Commissioner," the doctor said. Covering his own professional failings, she was sure. "But all signs are for full cortical integrity now that the temporary shock of the concussion has had time to subside. You have examined the records, ma'am."

Indeed she had. Not only had she examined them, she had pored over them, drunk them with her eyes, eaten them in her imagination to consume...contain...imprison him completely.

It was perhaps no longer quite sane of her, this obsession she had to rule him; she knew it. But she had only spoken truth when she said power was her truest lover, even though the man to whom she had revealed herself was dead. Power was her best and sweetest friend, and Avon the only man yet living who had defied her power -- political, psychological, physical, personal. Sexual.

For that reason alone, the fact that she now had unchallengeable power over him, body and breath, was too potent an aphrodisiac of the mind for her to care if she was being rational.

"Indeed I have, Doctor. There was something about nerve damage, as I recall." Shattered ribs and torn lung tissue, a compromised spinal column narrowly rescued and subsequently reinforced, a badly twisted arm or leg or three. She could count his injuries over in her mind, and tell the catalogue of old scars over like a rosary.



He would tell her about his scars. He would deny her no fragmentary portion of his pain. He belonged to her now, and she liked the idea of Avon in pain. It might even make him humble. Yes, perhaps...

"The organ itself is healing very nicely, but we have not yet had your leave to repair the traumatic injury to his optic nerve. There will be a profound sensitivity to light. Permission to treat the patient?"

She had permitted them everything else, bone-knit and skin-graft, deep healing coma, no stint of pain-suppressant drugs. Everything else, because she knew quite well about the optic nerve. It was perfect; he would not be impaired in any way, but vulnerable to even one candlepower of light that was of any other than a restricted frequency -- a vulnerability she would use to control him.

She had promised herself she would control him...

"No, he must begin to earn his way first, Doctor. No further intervention. Continue to support the present level of healing. In what way can this profound sensitivity be protected while we are investigating his willingness to cooperate?"

The doctor was a career Federation man; he had no apparent difficulties with the crippling impairment she proposed. His frown was mere concentration. "A neural block. No, a polarizing filter; a neural block would require surgery. He can be provided a lens, at the Commissioner's discretion, that will filter light down to an acceptable level, provided the light is of the correct range to begin with. The lens we can construct will only function in a limited spectrum, yellow light, low intensity..."

She could not have asked for better. "That will suffice, Doctor. It will be more than adequate. Have such a lens ready by the time he is to be awakened. And report to me immediately as the time comes. I mean to be present."

He bowed obedience, and Sleer turned away.

She would be waiting for him.

But for now, she had to make her preparations.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Chir, you know that the I/O interface for the subcomm has to be taken care of," Janel warned, raising an eyebrow. It was one of her most effective gestures, raising an eyebrow, and the subtechnicians all knew well enough by now that the delicate quirk of her thin, dark brow was only the prelude to something really drastic -- like sarcasm and punishment detail. She had done her apprenticeship in the art of the upraised eyebrow under an acknowledged master of the form, years gone by, and Chir's hasty attempts to explain and extricate himself were all the proof she needed, if any such need should be, of the continuing efficacy of the technique.

"Yes, Over-Technician Sibbet, but we received a special maintenance order for the Commissioner's personal quarters. No priority is assigned, but top priority is assumed, wouldn't you say? Ma'am?"



Chir's hopeful confidence was amusing, but Janel was not about to let him off so lightly, not after having invoked The Eyebrow. "What maintenance order?" she demanded. "I've seen no such thing. What does the Commissioner want -- this time?"

A bit, a very little bit, of irreverence was permissible between senior and subordinate. But only a very little bit. And Chir seemed almost frightened by even that very little bit.

"Low-spectrum yellow lighting to be installed, Over-Technician, to a specific range. Candlelight range, I believe she called for, but it's in the medical report, and I'll just be off and about to do it, if I may? Over-Technician Sibbet? Yes?"

Intrigued, Janel took the maintenance order with its attached specifications. The Commissioner's choice of descriptive phrases was anachronistic, but nonetheless accurate -- a candlelight range, in sharp contrast to the much brighter and more intense blue-white light that illuminated the rest of Sleer's base on Gauda Prime. Medical specifications? But not for Sleer; apparently, the reconfiguration was for the benefit of the prisoner she was so jealously concealing from the authorities.

Well...

This was interesting.

"Agreed, off you go," she said, to free Chir for his task and soothe his evident anxieties. "The other thing is absolutely next. Right?"

"You can count on me," he assured her, with obvious relief. "Ma'am. On my way."

Well, now. Cabin reconfiguration tailored for some deficit suffered by the prisoner the Commissioner hadn't told her superiors about. Normally, the survivor of a massacre like the one they had come in on would be surrendered at the first opportunity, to present the appropriately blameless I'm-not-hiding-anything image. Sleer knew that better than anyone. Janel was certain of that; she didn't care for the Commissioner personally, but Sleer was unquestionably very good. And very successful. What prisoner could be so important -- or so dangerous -- that the Commissioner would not only risk concealing his official existence, no matter the unofficial datalinks, but also have her own suite tailored to his needs as well? Someone who knew her, obviously. Someone on the wrong side of the war, or they'd not have found him where they had...

Fascinating. A lovely puzzle...

She was bored. And the information was probably impossible to reach anyway, so there could be no harm in trying to find out more, could there? Especially not if she was careful, and avoided alerting anyone.

She knew how to be careful.

Who was this man? And why was he important?

Janel smiled to herself, happy in the apprehension of a fine new problem to solve, and set to work to slip into the medical area's records. It would be a start...

\* \* \* \* \*



It was not the pain that awakened him; it was not the dreadful shattered anguish of helplessness and unimaginable injury that called him up out of the Stygian depths of his protectively unconscious dreaming. The pain had no power to wake him, even though it was pure and bright and dreadful, more deep and horrible than any he had ever known before. The pain was only pain, and suffer as he did, he had no respect for simple agony. Pain merely hurt. It was not sufficient cause of itself for any action, howsoever involuntary; he had lived with chronic pain before and held it in contempt as a weak natterer.

It was the absence of pain that awakened him -- the absence of the fiery torment of his nerves and the dull, uncomprehending protest of his bones. There was no pain. Surely that was worthy of note, worthy of investigation, and -- half unwilling yet, not certain he was interested enough to surrender his unconsciousness for any analytical problem, no matter how fresh and unexpected -- Avon let his awareness of no-pain rise to surface consciousness, and buoy the rest of his intelligence into the waking world along with it.

No pain.

He lay in a bed, a clean bed by its smell, in a warm, dark room, and there was no pain worth attending to, merely the aches and twinges of residual healing. He stretched himself, muscle against muscle, luxuriating in his relaxation and cataloguing his condition to his own satisfaction at one and the same time. Whatever bones had been broken were mended, and it didn't hurt to breathe.

There was, however, a voice. He was not disturbed by its presence; he had rather expected it all along. As long as he could remember. Memory ran only far enough to persuade him of the advisability of leaving its reluctant doorway shut, at least for a while longer; therefore, there was no reason he could find to suspect or mistrust the voice -- gentle, female, low in pitch, and melodic in phrasing -- that murmured to him in the painless dark and walked with him to waking.

"I want you to wake up, Avon. I need to talk to you. It is past time we had a little conversation. I want you to wake up, Avon. I mean to have your attention. Come along."

No reason, but he knew he trusted her absolutely -- and also that what he trusted her to do was lie to him, and use him if she could. He knew her; he was almost glad to have her here, a familiar...voice...in an uncertain environment. He was under no apprehensive confusion of mind where she was concerned.

She would want to have her way, and the odds were that if he did not choose to cooperate, she would find ways to compel him. He could hardly pretend to be operating from a position of power; his position was prone. It was better to go along with her, surely, at least until he knew his circumstances -- and it would not hurt if he could create in her a false sense of security.

At length, he forced his throat to sound and mouth to form the familiar shape that would produce the woman's name.

"Servalan."

His voice sounded strong and confident in his own ears; he had expected some evident strain. It was an anomalous note, but she did not seem surprised, either by the timbre of his speech



or by his quick identification, so perhaps it was what had been expected.

"Yes, Avon, I'm glad you're awake. Do you know where you are? Tell me."

And, oh, the note of sincere concern in her voice. He smiled to himself, appreciating the range of her duplicitous abilities. "In hospital, I should think. Your prisoner, most probably."

Now he could hear amusement in her voice, as she shifted her position. "Indeed." Beside him. She sat beside him. He could strangle her, if he liked -- except that she would certainly have taken his predictable desire to do so into account.

"You are, in fact, in base infirmary, my prisoner. Or, as I should prefer to think of you, my guest. Are you feeling somewhat recovered?"

"It is difficult to say." On the one hand, he was emphatically relieved at how well he felt, at how little pain he had. But on the other... There was a confusion in his mind. Recovered from what, precisely? He was not sure, and cast about cautiously for some hint from her about what might have happened to him. "I don't seem to be in any significant discomfort. It's a pity this state of affairs cannot be expected to maintain."

She laughed, genuine amusement -- and genuine, if afflicted, affection -- in her silvery tones. Silvery tones. He did not grudge her the music of her speaking; he had some knowledge of what it had cost her to acquire it. "Avon, you are too hard on both of us by half. I wish you only the best. I want you to be my companion from now on. I have the utmost confidence in your ability to be sensible about things."

Now it was beginning to turn in on itself. Now her words began to lead into vine-tangled manipulative knots. "You have seen me fail to be...sensible...before."

An interesting word, "sensible." He held it in his mouth and savoured it, realizing he was hungry -- and thirsty -- as well as curious. "Sensible" carried reference to the senses, and there was something wrong there, somehow. "What in particular convinces you that things are different this time, if I may ask?"

It was too dark in the room. He could not see the expression on her face, although he could see the shadowy outline of her form well enough to assure himself that it was lack of light, rather than injury, that interfered with his eyesight. All the same, he felt a headache starting, of the sort he had associated with eyestrain frequently enough before, localized somewhere vaguely behind his left eye...

"You are polite to me, Avon. I like that." She moved around to stand over him as she spoke, leaning over the bed, her hands resting on his chest. Like the claws of a harpy, he mused idly, poised to tear his lungs out on a whim. "I have excellent reason to believe things will be different between us. From now on, you are going to be even more polite to me. Because you are a reasonable man, and you know when you've been beaten."

She'd always had a good command of the language, had Servalan. She was not unlike the Delphic oracle that way. What she seemed to say would frequently turn out to carry something either additional or quite different, that one only realized when it was -- ironically -- too late.

In this instance, he thought he could read her message well enough. "I'm afraid I've never



responded especially well to behavioural conditioning. You will have to do better than that."

It was obvious enough. He would be polite, or he would be beaten. Or otherwise disciplined. He didn't have to ask how; Tarrant and Dayna had told him about Forbus. She was clearly capable of taking extreme measures, but it was difficult to imagine what she could think of that would be impressive enough for him without killing him more quickly than he suspected she would like.

He could see the dim shine of her smile, moving as she tilted her head. "Actually, it isn't anything I've done which gives me such confidence, Avon. Just a minor hold-over from your recent injuries. Oh, I'll want to hear you thank me for saving your life, but it will wait."

The harpy's claws moved from his chest; she petted his face with two fingers. A carrion caress that turned his stomach, but it had ever been so, with Servalan -- it was her fascination for him, after all, the conflict and desire she had always roused in him. "Avon, I know that you know I am a woman of my word. Ah, in a manner of speaking. Now, I am promising you that if you do not do as I say, you will regret it more than you can possibly imagine."

He was content to let her talk, and she was obviously of a mind to make a speech. "Go on."

"I also trust you to realize that I will get what I want. I don't care what I have to do to get it. I would prefer not to have to hurt you. I am asking you to believe me -- you do not want to find out. Kiss me, Avon. You have lost. Your only avenue now is to do as you are told."

Kiss her? Kiss her? Perhaps it was true, what she said -- that he had lost, that he had no choice. But that was immaterial. "I have no intention whatever of doing as you say. You should know me better than that, Servalan."

He expected anger, or taunting words. He got neither. Instead, she rose to her feet and moved away from him, talking as if he had offered no resistance -- except that she had heard him; it was clear from the content of her speech.

"And also, you will never use that name aloud again -- ever. Oh, not that anyone would believe you if you did. But you will call me only 'Commissioner,' and you will be grateful to me, Avon, that I do not choose instead to be called 'master.' Technician, you may turn on the lights."

He saw the subtle flicker that marked the power surge, initiating the lighting sequence.

Suddenly, his mind screamed warning at him, but it was already too late. The room was full of light, flooded with light -- bright, white, agonizing illumination that seemed to burn through his eye into his brain and down through his spinal column into every fibre of his being. Light, light that was no longer instrumental to see by, no longer an environmental factor, to be adjusted or taken into account -- but a fiery source of agony so profound he could not grasp the depths of that huge torment.

He heard himself, as if from afar, screaming, a hoarse, high-pitched voice he only knew was his own; he certainly could not recognize it. Only dimly aware of his actions, he knew he struggled convulsively in his anguish, rolling off the bed, into a corner, trying desperately to hide his face, to cover his face, to shield himself, but to no avail.



With his face pressed fiercely into the surface of the bed, it found him. With his hands laid over his eye with desperate strength, it found him. Clutching at his head, huddled in a corner, it found him. He could find no escape or diminution, no matter what he did -- and he could not attack the light itself, could not force himself to so much as turn his face in the direction of the source. He was trapped, and he was helpless, and he suffered pain he could not even comprehend. And then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone again.

She had turned off the lights.

Slowly, as his convulsed body loosened its fearful foetal curl, he felt his arms and legs stretch out quivering along the floor, and the stench of his extremity of pain was hateful -- but instructive. He had never known pain could be so sudden, so huge, and the transcendent, irresistible power of that pain stunned him out of all his will to resist -- even while his intellect, the least responsive and most stubborn part of him, knew almost as immediately as conscious thought resumed that the pain was neural in its origin.

Nerve damage. Optic nerve damage. So much was only obvious. He didn't see where knowing it was going to be of any particular help to him.

Someone knelt beside him. He felt the icy hiss of an injection. The residual reverberations of the astonishing agony fell off quickly then, dulled into a soothing narcotic haze.

Avon was grateful. "Thank you," he said, without sarcasm and without pretense.

If this was what she meant, then he was beaten, at least for the time being. He found himself so incapable of imagining that torture again that the idea of doing as he was told made the very best of sense, now that he knew better.

She had tried to warn him; he had not believed her. This time, he should have believed her; she had him, well and truly. "Thank you, Commissioner. I take back what I said. Don't turn on the lights again. I promise it won't be necessary."

He heard the rustling of her skirts, but made no move to stand up, content to lie on his back on the floor and let the drugs shield his consciousness from the pain he had just experienced.

Now that he knew, of course, it put things in a whole new light. Only an idiot preferred punishment on that level to cooperation, no matter how demeaning. He no longer had any friends to be betrayed. It was only his own honour that would suffer, but his honour and his self-respect would simply have to accept it. He had no intention of suffering for them, not again, not like that.

She knelt beside him. "Sit up, Avon. Put your back to the wall. I did warn you that it was effective."

"Yes. You did." His strength returned with surprising rapidity -- another reason for suspecting his vulnerability lay in damaged nerves. He sat up against the wall, and felt her hand against his face, felt something cool and hard, like a ceramic, held just beneath his right eye.

"Now, open your eyes, Avon. You'll be wearing this shield. It will protect you. In a modest way."



She sounded genuinely shaken, and he had to be amused at that. Had he surprised her? Had the efficacy of her own chosen weapon so startled and disgusted her, once she saw it used? He fumbled for the eye-shield with his hands, glad of assistance in getting it in place. It felt heavy and awkward and alien, and cold. But she said it would protect him.

"Now we can turn on the lights once more, and you will feel no pain, Avon. This will protect you under yellow low-energy forms of light. As long as you stay where you're told, you will be safe. Technician?"

He wanted to grab for her hand and beg her, in panic, not to turn on the lights. Reassurances aside, the panic threatened to swamp him, and he held it in only with a grim effort -- substantially assisted by the fact that it was rendered meaningless and unneeded almost as soon as he recognized it. The lights came back on. But they were perceptibly different lights, softer, dimmer -- the lower-powered range. Yellow light. And there was no pain, beyond the painful tension of his fear.

He let his breath out slowly, wondering at how profoundly his body learned, how quickly -- given the correct stimulus.

Servalan had found the correct stimulus.

"There should be no discomfort," she said. It was almost a challenge, as well as a soliciting of information. She would have demanded an effective shield, and would want to be assured that her orders were followed. He wondered why it mattered to her. Where did the difference lie, from Servalan's point of view, between a little pain and no pain? Was it just that she felt she could afford to be generous, secure in her knowledge of the pain she held in reserve for him?

"There is no pain," he said. "Thank you. Commissioner." It hardly mattered; there was no sense in being petty about such things. He was honestly grateful for the eye-shield, no matter what the motivation behind it might be. There was no pain, and he could see quite clearly out of his other eye. Well enough to see the curious, waiting face of her. What could it be now? "I take it this adjustment is useless under more normal light? And that effectively restricts my range of movement. Very clever."

"It was not possible to shield from high-intensity light." She had never grudged him information, not when she felt it offered him no advantage. "You are forgetting, Avon, I asked you to do something."

Tyrannical by nature, she would always put her orders as requests -- more autocratic, rather than less, by virtue of the additional burden placed on her subordinates of fulfilling her every whim as well as each instruction.

"I'm sorry, I can't collect my thoughts. What did you want?"

In response, she only leaned closer.

Then he remembered.

It was harder than he would have thought, but still a minor thing when compared to what else she had to threaten him with. Therefore, he put his head up to her face and kissed her, set his mouth against hers and waited for her to open to him. As she had done before.



Instead, she only sat back on her heels and smiled at him. "Very good. Oh, we will get along famously, Avon. I'm glad to have you at my side at last."

"Just be careful I don't get a chance to get behind you. Commissioner."

Her smile broadened, predatory and proprietary at once. "I'm afraid not. There's nowhere for you to run, nowhere that the suns don't shine or the lights aren't needed. You would never even get three steps from this door without my direct intervention, so get used to it."

She could be right.

"If that is what you wish, of course, Commissioner."

She frowned at the sarcastic submissiveness of his choice of phrase.

But he was confident she knew as well as he that it was the merest bravado on his part.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janel Sibbet sat at her control module, kicking her heels, thinking about going for a cold drinktab. There wasn't much else to do but sit and pull drinktabs, not at present, and there were all the drinktabs she wanted. The others could not be bothered to consume their rations, so it was all left for her. Everyone else put all their energy into wangling extra intoxicants or extra soma solutions.

She was content with drinktabs, and things were quiet. There was no reason to keep her eye on things one hundred percent of the time with internal affairs this slow -- no contact with higher headquarters until the casualty reports had been suitably doctored, and no reason to expect any movement until after the casualty reports went in. Half her staff were on clean-up detail, and the other half were trying to avoid realizing they were scheduled to go on clean-up detail, since the interrogation staff had long since ceased to really worry about disguising the bodies as cave-in victims, and it was impossible to ignore the evidence of how they had died even while one was required to record the corpse as having died in battle of injuries sustained therein.

She had been angry about the interrogation staff once, years ago. But as she progressed slowly up the ladder of responsibility -- and complicity -- she had gotten, if not used, at least accustomed to the idea that it was necessary.

She had been badly frightened by an interrogation staff once, years ago. It was as human a thing as charity, to use terror as an instrument of government. And they had been charitable to her, above and beyond declining to put her to The Question when she was vulnerable to that fate. They had sent her on her way, and let her know the man with whom she was suspected of conspiring had not been tortured -- more than a little. Had not been wrung until he'd broken, although there had been pain, but had been simply, sweetly, condemned to transportation. She had been grateful to the interrogation staff ever since, and she had no particular charge against the Commissioner, even if Sibbet's own staff had not yet gained the maturity to accept Interrogation's existence as a necessary part of political life.

The interrogation staff would not care if she went out for a drinktab. She thought about it for a moment, and, providentially, the moment's thought delayed her just long enough. She was



still present and on line when the Chief of Medical Staff hit on her priority channel.

"Over-Technician Sibbet, this is Dr. Allin. Respond, please."

All physicians were autocrats, and Allin was a frustrated tyrant on top of it. Frustrated, because Sleer insisted on subordinating all of his resources to the interrogation staff. A tyrant in that he perhaps naturally took his frustration out on everyone within reach who was not included among the Commissioner's especial pets.

"This is Sibbet, sir. How may I be of service?"

She chose her response mode carefully, in light of this knowledge. She didn't care to give him any cause to bring a complaint against her; internecine squabbles were boring ever since the master had shown her what they could be like with truly expert handling.

"There will be a patient transfer from the secured infirmary area. Shut down all the corridor systems leading from secured infirmary and extending for a five hundred metre global radius."

A five hundred metre global radius from secured infirmary would include supply, executive dining, medical clinic areas, and interrogation areas. The immediate implication was that a prisoner had recovered enough from either injury or previous interrogation to be moved back to the torture cells. But why black-out?

"Understood, sir. Duration of system shut-down?"

Either someone was not to be seen, or there was another reason. And if someone was not to be seen going to interrogation, it would scarcely be necessary to invoke system shut-down, since nobody ever really saw prisoners anyway. Not even when looking straight at them. It was one of the cardinal rules, after all. One only saw what one was specifically shown or instructed to see. So it couldn't be that someone was not to be seen.

Perhaps someone was not to be seen going in one particular direction, as opposed to another. Allin had already told her a prisoner was leaving secured infirmary, because only a prisoner would be in secured infirmary to begin with. So the natural and expected direction would be the morgue or the interrogation section. The unusual directions would be the executive area, supply, medical offices.

The Commissioner's suite was located within the five hundred metre global radius, although it was separately secured. And on a separate lighting system -- recently modified to accommodate someone with some sort of visual defect.

"On my mark, and for twenty measures. One more thing. This is to be an accidental shut-down, do you understand me? My directions come from the highest imaginable source."

Which only confirmed that the prisoner was the Commissioner's special interest. And was to be transferred to the Commissioner's quarters, yes, clearly. "Understood, sir. Emergency lighting will be in effect."

He hadn't expected that, she could tell. "That won't do, Technician. I want absolute black-out, no emergency lighting."

"Understood, sir. However, in any given random failure, the emergency lighting becomes



immediately enabled. There isn't any way to obtain total black-out conditions without deliberate intervention, and a saboteur would be required."

He would know precisely what she was getting at. A saboteur would be required -- from her staff. She could hardly be expected to sacrifice one of her staff without a more persuasive argument than the doctor had as yet provided.

"We'll have to sedate..." Allin muttered, as if to himself. It was almost as if he had forgotten she was there, but he broke off abruptly, to give her dismissal.

"Very well, emergency lighting will have to remain in effect. Starting now, for twenty...no, thirty minutes. Out, here."

No, he wasn't happy, but he wasn't going to insist, either. That implied he did not in fact have the Commissioner's blessing, and was unwilling to risk invoking her name without her knowledge. Interesting. It was the work of a moment to crash the system and black the required area, with most of the rest of the base thrown in for good measure. She wasn't worried; if there were official inquiries, her tail was covered -- since a mere over-technician could not be expected to question an order that came to her personally from Chief Medical Officer Allin.

Emergency lighting in effect meant the surveillance cameras remained functional as well. She wondered if Allin knew -- or cared. Once the "emergency" was over, there would be plenty of time in which to review the record, and report if necessary on any illegal activity performed under the cover of relative darkness.

She'd have a look at this prisoner.

But first, she'd have a nice, cold drinktab or two.

She put the immediate queries from all sections on prerecorded maintenance message and went out, happy with the way her shift was developing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yes, the Commissioner was aware, bitterly so, that ownership would never match the thrill of acquisition, that having the desired thing was never quite as sweet as the deliriums of fantasy one permitted oneself to indulge in while still at the stage of merely wanting it.

And still, she could wish her staff was a little less adept at ruining the illusion for her.

She watched at her private monitor as they brought Avon into his prison -- her quarters. She had long anticipated the expression on his face as he explored his surroundings, as he went through the rooms, as he realized there was only one bed and it was obviously hers. Oh, she had dreamed, and waited... But the idiot doctor had deprived her of her pleasure, brought Avon into quarters sedated and under restraint.

She had given orders for the lights to be turned out, especially so he would not be sedated, especially so there would be no gradual awakening to his new environment. She would have a word with her Chief of Medical Staff... But in the meantime, there was no help for it. They brought Avon in under sedation and laid him upon the bed, and they would not leave until he regained full consciousness, responsible physicians that they were.



It was disgusting.

There was nothing left to do but throw them all out of her bedroom and take command of the situation -- before he woke up.

She much preferred not leaving her command centre at mid-shift, but this time the possibility the crew might slack off in her absence had to be balanced against the attainment of her goal. She left Dena in charge; the woman had as little imagination as a mutoid, and as little sense of humour, and in her absence should serve adequately well to maintain discipline.

Quarters for a ranking officer were necessarily almost contiguous to the command centre itself. She made her entrance, her gratification at the startled, and frightened, expressions on the faces of the men so rudely crowding her bedroom serving to soothe her irritation to a moderate -- a very moderate -- degree.

She poised herself imperiously in the doorway, raking each man present with a glare comprised of equal parts killing contempt and incredulous outrage. "What is the meaning of this... intrusion?"

Avon lay on the coverlet, unstrung, barely conscious, more helpless -- fully dressed, and in her sanctuary -- than he had seemed these many days past in the secured infirmary area. She would not dwell on Avon; she would save that pleasure for later. For now, there were dogs to be whipped out of chambers.

"The lights could not be completely dimmed without invoking formal investigations." The CMO stumbled over his own words, which was moderately gratifying. "As the Commissioner had specified minimal disruption, sedation of the patient was the only alternative within specified parameters..."

Perhaps he was telling the truth, but he still would require punishment for having disappointed her expectations. She raised her hands, a practiced, imperious gesture of contempt and dismissal. "Enough! We will discuss it later. Leave me now. At once."

She was too proud to favour them with so much as a glance as they filed out, to emphasize the futility of offering her any argument. They cleared her area with appropriately cowed haste, and she was almost satisfied with her power over them -- almost. She would save consideration of how they were to accept discipline until later. For now...

For now, there was Avon, and it would still be lovely to watch him wake. How? Standing? Lying at his side?

She sat down on the bed while she pondered, cradling his head against her thigh. The heavy bones of his face were so self-contained and unforgiving beneath her palm...

But she would have his submission yet, personal and intimate, and not just the reasonable response of a rational man to pain. Contemplatively, she touched the proud, disdainful line of his upper lip with one finger.

Quite suddenly -- she had no warning; no change in breathing alerted her -- Avon spoke, his voice full of self-possessed power, for all that he had been carried here drugged, insensible, lest the pain overbalance his physician's willingness to suffer his impairment to continue.



"What next, Servalan? Or is it too depressingly obvious?"

She was startled by his speaking at all, surprised by his self-confident and almost mocking tone of voice, and the impudence of his phrase in and of itself was enough to set her speechless for a moment, as she adjusted her expectations to meet the challenge of his insolence.

"I told you a thing about how I will be addressed, Avon." In an uncertain situation, threat was by far the safest default. She needed to regain the initiative. "I do not mean to have to tell you again. And it is important that you pay attention to me, concentrate, keep your wits about you. Because the only way in which I can dream of affecting your behaviour is to make your life very unpleasant for you. Neither of us wants that, you must believe me."

He could not believe her, but it was true. Beautiful as he was, she had no particular investment in hearing him scream. She had already heard him; he had the same accent, in agony, as any other man. She wanted his submission, constant and careful. He was not submissive to her when he was unconscious.

Now, he raised his hands to his eyes, as if coming more fully awake, as if realizing his breach of etiquette as he did so. "Ah. Yes, I think I remember. Do you want me to ask your pardon, Commissioner?"

Whether or not he was truly just remembering, he was clearly well in possession of his faculties. Not even in extremity would Avon suggest he "beg" someone's pardon; "ask" was sufficient concession. She decided to accept it as such -- for the time being.

"Come with me."

It didn't require an answer. If she wanted him to beg her pardon, it would be easy enough to convince him of the wisdom of that ceremony. All she had to do was turn on the lights, turn on the bright lights still available to her at the touch of a toggle, and he would immediately be more than happy to beg the pardon of whoever had the power to turn them off. That was no reflection on him, no reflection on Avon. It was a simple fact, and therefore rather sordid, not to say boring.

He rose, somewhat stiffly, from the bed, and she permitted him to stand for a moment to get his bearings. It would take her a little while to get used to the eye-shield. Its dull, grey surface seemed in rather poor taste, set as it was amidst the darker, warmer colours of his face. Perhaps she would have it redesigned to improve its aesthetic qualities.

"I want to show you your new home."

She held her hand out to him, confident he would take his cue. Even so, it seemed he had to think about it; there was a momentary pause -- too brief to be called hesitation, surely too minor to deserve calling to his attention as a detected lapse of service -- before he joined his hand to hers, as bidden. She would have her revelatory scenes after all, a little differently than planned, but what was the mark of a successful field commander, if not the ability to adjust one's expectations and order of battle at a moment's notice?

She led him out of the bedroom and into the lab, where he would work.

She hadn't had a pet in years.







She was really looking forward to breaking Avon in.

\* \* \* \* \*

He had more than half expected the bed; it seemed such a natural development, in light of Servalan's obvious obsession with control. And given the bed, given her predictable wish to have him available to her, to respond to whatever whim she might have, he supposed the rest of the living arrangements -- the reserved toilet facilities, the physical conditioning equipment -- did follow, perhaps not necessarily, but no less inevitably for all of that, considering the temperament of his captor. She had delicate sensibilities in unusual places, in precisely those places one would most expect to find hardened imperturbability. She would not want to have to call for him, and have him brought to her; all the staff would know, or possess the capability for knowing, when she wanted to see him, and for how long.

No, she would have him prisoner in her own suite, private and to herself, where his meals would be delivered to the lab, where the first assignment she gave him was her requirement that he assure himself he could not get out.

He did not expect to be given the next task.

Assurance of the efficiency of his prison, the absolute nature of his captivity, did not take Avon above five days to gain. He tried every means at his command, and Servalan obligingly provided him all the materials he could want. He knew her motive -- she only wanted to convince him he was trapped -- but could not resist the offered temptations.

He tried. He tried shielding; he tried forcing a power failure; he tried seeing how far he could get on sheer will-power. And finally, he gave over trying, for the time being, and abandoned the painful process of trial and agony until he could think of some way around the absolute fact of his disability. He could not block the damnable sensitivity of his eye, and he could not function under any but a narrowly defined spectrum of visible light. Clearly, he had to derive a new angle of attack on the problem; and Servalan, taking his cessation of activity for a mark of surrender, of abandonment of hope, set him to his new task, his next task, the one he had not dreamed of.

Orac.

He did not know what had become of Orac's key, nor did she tell him. Lost, damaged, destroyed, or simply held in reserve for some unguessed-at reason of her own -- it made no difference, not really. She wanted him to reconstruct the key; she wanted access to Orac. If the key was in fact not in her possession, Orac was worse than useless to her, taunting in the inaccessibility of all its special capabilities. The demand for a new key was only reasonable, and he went to it with a willing concentration. He had reasons of his own for wanting it.

He would need Orac's help to escape, once he learned how to circumvent the residual effect of his injuries. And she would know that; for all the contempt in which he held her, Avon had nothing but the utmost respect for her analytic ability.

He had no choice but to respect that ability; she had out-thought him too many times, and there was no one left alive before whom to pretend it was not so. Servalan would perhaps count on his urgency to increase the speed and efficiency of his work; it would be like her.



But she would know what he intended, and she had demonstrated to his satisfaction that, although she was supremely confident of his absolute vulnerability, she had not fallen into the error of imagining it made him less of the man he had been.

He was tired of the reasoning and counter-reasoning of it, the plot and re-plot and alter-plot of it.

On the evening of the fifth day, when she came back to quarters, Avon decided to ask her.

There was a signal when she came into quarters, a warning tone as she approached in the corridor -- a charitable gesture, warning him to shield himself in the work-room should he be out of it for any reason, so he would not suffer from the bright lights beyond when the door opened. And then another tone, to let him know she was there, that he was expected to attend upon her.

When he opened the work-room door to make his required appearance, she was sitting at her table, waiting for him, one of her less pleasant expressions of predatory hostility on her face -- but she did not impress him. She had yet to become petty enough to subject him to the light on the basis of mere irritation, although she reminded him often enough of her ability to do so at the touch of a switch. So he sat down across from her, frowning in an attempt to focus on her face after the unaccustomed day-long strain of trying to do with one eye what he had done with two for all his life.

"What interest do you have in my escaping, Commissioner?"

The eye-strain gave him a fierce headache, and she was more than free with her offers of drugs to treat it -- for which reason alone, he declined them. Reason dictated that the pain would fade in time as his body adjusted to the de facto loss of an eye, and medicating the pain would only render him vulnerable to habituation -- which would in turn give her a better and more subtle weapon with which to seek to control him.

He'd not had her permission to speak, but she only looked at him sullenly and chewed her lip. What could have put her in this mood? Some political problem she dared not discuss with him? Some obscure personal frustration at his own adjustment to imprisonment, such as it was?

"You cannot escape, Avon. You will never be free. It is in my best interest for you to internalize this, deeply, and the sooner the better. The sooner you have Orac up and working, the sooner Orac will tell you the same thing."

It was not surprising that she knew exactly where his inquiry originated. "And you base your conviction completely on my own physical handicap?"

Restless, she rose from the table and went to the liquor cart to pour herself a drink. "Your physical impairment is all that is required to assure my confidence. No other bar or gate need be applied. My conviction in your helplessness is absolute."

Oh, yes, she was in a mood tonight. He could have smiled, but she would have liked that; she seemed to thirst for something that might pass for human contact between them. As if he could have human contact with her, a woman who could be described as human only in the broadest possible sense of the term. "Then hasten the process of submission to your will by convincing me you really believe I'm beaten. Prove to me there are no bars, no gates. Show me I could walk away from here unmolested if only I could find a way around the problem I have with the



light."

"I'm getting tired of this," she warned. "You want proof? I'll give you all the proof you need, and then perhaps you'll realize how little there is between you and the Abyss." She sipped her drink and sauntered past him to her comm panel, swinging her hips with calculated insolence. "Come here, Avon, and I'll show you what you're after. Control, this is Commissioner Sleer. I want the Chief Technician."

There was a pause after the usual respectful panic. "I have a yacht," she explained. She was quite close to him; her willingness to be alone with him -- unarmed -- would have been convincing enough for any other man.

Avon was not any other man, and they both knew it, although she did her best to pretend she thought that little of him as a matter of belittling policy. "My own private craft, fully equipped, the very best equipment, capable of long-range flight at time distort eleven. Give the order to have it brought on line, Avon, and it will be yours; you can handle it with ease, with Orac's help. All you have to do is get to it. And you cannot get to it."

There was noise from the other end of her comm link, and with a fine contemptuous flourish of her elegantly taloned hands, she gestured for him to take over. "Go on, give the order. I stand in no danger of losing my craft."

"This is Chief Technician Sibbet, Commissioner. What is the Commissioner's pleasure?"

No, she was in no danger of losing her craft. Not in the way she meant it. Avon keyed the respond, amused in spite of himself by how well they understood each other -- and repulsed by what that fact implied about him, if he could be so well understood by Servalan.

"The Commissioner's private craft is to be brought on line and maintained in immediate departure readiness status." The sound of his own voice amused him as well -- sharp, imperious, demanding. He could play the rôle as well as she, if pressed. "Report on present status."

But the Chief Technician was not, apparently, a woman to be so easily bullied. "With all due respect, sir, disposition of the Commissioner's craft must be at the Commissioner's word. Without prior clearance from the Commissioner herself, your requirements cannot be adequately addressed. Sir."

And it seemed to genuinely make so little difference to Servalan that, as she moved forward to address the comm herself, her expression was one of only the same minor level of irritation. "You have my clearance, Sibbet. Provide the requested status information."

"Very good, ma'am."

The short pause that intervened would be data-retrieval, Avon guessed. The Chief Technician was back on line too quickly for it to be anything else -- unless it was a voice verification on the Commissioner.

"Vehicle is prepared and being brought to departure readiness status. Fuel is at one hundred percent, with additional fifty percent in reserve. Minimum range before reserve use at sixteen thousand spatials. Life support systems will accommodate a crew of three hominid life forms for a minimum period of forty days Standard cycle. Will there be anything else, sir?"



He could give her the course, could have her preprogram the only logical target for him. There was only one place he could go, when all was said and done. But Servalan would guess it soon enough -- or else there was the chance she would never guess it. He would have to wait until he boarded the yacht to see if she had the course preprogrammed and waiting for him.

And for that, he would have to wait until he solved his problem of how he was to get away from her.

"Location?" he asked for form's sake, half-distracted by his musings. Orac would guide him to where the craft lay, when he found the correct structure for Orac's key. But Servalan would be disappointed if he didn't ask.

"Secured launch area zone four sub beta. Per operating procedure."

He could think of nothing else to ask. He shut off the comm, and Servalan, drink still in one hand, led him to the viewscreen in the corner. "You'd better hope the screen intensity of this display has been modified, Avon. Here, let me show you something..."

He wrapped her arm companionably in his two hands, unperturbed by the appearance of anxiety it might present, and waited. If the screen intensity had not been adjusted, he could always hope he would break her arm in the convulsive and consuming agony he already knew too well to expect. One repetition of pain on that level was all that was necessary to condition his responses.

As she coded her command-display instructions, he could not deny he was afraid; but when the screen came up, it brought no anguish with it. So he was safe. It was bright, a little too much so to be comfortable for his good eye -- if an eye that had been so much overstressed the past few days could still be so euphemistically characterized. His better eye, perhaps.

It was the base schematic she had. She was going to be thorough about this, she was.

"This is our location, and here is the connecting lift that will take you to your escape vehicle. Look well at this, and memorize it, because I don't intend to indulge your fantasies again. There is the craft. It is ready and waiting for you. You have Orac in the work-room, and the perfect hostage -- here I am. You are ready to make your escape at any time -- at any time you feel you can face the lights. Now, are you satisfied? I'm going to bed."

She turned away dismissingly, but he knew what was expected. Following her into the bedroom, he waited until she stopped in the middle of the room, with her back still turned. He began to unfasten the secures at the back of her dress. Yes, he told himself. I'm quite satisfied. And I'm quite certain I will find a way to make you sorry you were ever so sure of me.

But all the same, he was disturbed by her supreme self-confidence, and knew better than to try to hide it from himself. The sooner he found an escape, the better.

Every day he spent in her presence was one more reason to give up the fight entirely, for that was the inevitable effect of helplessness...

\* \* \* \*

Janel Sibbet sat for a long moment, staring at the featureless comm in front of her. That voice. How could she be so convinced of herself, on only that evidence? But it had to be his



voice. She could hardly have forgotten it, not after all those months of never-repeated excitement, all the time she spent as under-technician assigned to the project with him as technical supervisor.

His voice. She had always known there was no future in it, never understood why he accepted her gradual obsession with his presence without question and without discomfort. Perhaps, she told herself then -- and many times since -- perhaps it was that she asked nothing of him, expected nothing of him beyond the scope of their professional interface. She certainly got nothing of him except the memory of the project, the fond, rueful amusement she directed at that younger, stouter version of herself, the treasured reflection of how sweet and special unimportant things became when they were filtered through the soft, thick layers of abstract and devoted love.

There had been times when the only thing that made her life worthwhile was the sound of his voice, coming into the Section, crossing behind her.

\*Good morning, Sibbet.\*

\*Good morning, sir...\*

She always knew when he was behind her; she could smell him, after all. A special fragrance compounded of whatever toiletries he favoured and the heat of his own flesh, unmistakable, unique. Yet when she confided in a friend that she noticed how good her supervisor smelled, she received only a puzzled glance, a look of real confusion, an admission that her friend had noticed, could remember noticing, but that it meant nothing...

No one in whom she could confide, and only her own thoughts for guidance. No one with whom she could discuss and test whether it was just wish fulfillment on her part when she came to think there was a special warmth in his voice when he talked to her, a certain affection in his reaction to her achievements, some residual fondness in him for her that brought him to seek her out on particularly bad days, to say good night to her as well as good morning...

Oh, it had been a right witch of a project, and the heat from up the chain of supervision had been terrific. The single worst eight months of her life, but they made her career -- and his, too -- because between them, they'd been pure excellence personified. She'd never had a better technical supervisor; she guessed he'd never had a better under-technician. The others certainly hadn't been more than competent, and the over-technician -- while definitely not unqualified -- had not been able to match his requirements nearly as well as she could.

Eight months, and many years ago, and still she knew his voice without any question in her mind, as if she had heard it just this morning, as if he had just now passed behind her station with that faint trace of musk and pepper lingering in his wake.

\*Good morning, Sibbet.\*

\*Good morning, Avon, sir...\*

There were the tapes from the surveillance cameras, the ones made while the power was down. She'd meant to go and have a look, to find out who Smeer's prisoner might be, who was so critically important to the Commissioner.

And yet, she already knew what she would find.



\* \* \* \* \*

The days passed. Avon became more conscientious and correct about his duties. But something still wasn't there, and Servalan was not satisfied.

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, and that irritated her -- an irritation she took out on him in a dozen petty ways, demanding personal services, demanding forms of sexual indulgence, demanding servile language and careful deference. He didn't always do as he was told, but he did so often enough, and she could not understand where the problem lay.

Was it because he was still imperfectly acquiescent? Or because he was too often too willing to do as he was told? She missed the sharp edge of his aggression, missed the ruthless tang of blood in his counter-attack.

She didn't exactly know what the problem was. But there was a problem. It was getting to the point where she considered reporting his existence after all; once he made a new key for Orac, there seemed no further...useful...thing for her to ask of him. As it turned out, having him for her own was not quite satisfying enough, although he was as good as she had expected -- oh, every bit as good as she'd expected him to be, in one area at least. His contempt and his reluctance, his assumed solicitude, his pretense so careless of concealment, made him a better lover than she had dreamed, almost addicting in the sensual fulfillment he represented.

She knew there was a secret weakness in her heart that no other lover -- hesitant, respectful -- could hope to touch. She had not promised herself that Avon would satisfy her needs because she could not admit, had not been able to admit until now, that she had a certain desire to be despised, a twisted hunger to be thoroughly involved in the most intimate embrace with a man -- a strong man, a dominant one -- who had contempt for her.

And therefore now, although she had fed deep and long of the subtle satisfaction Avon represented to her, she could not permit the perfection of his treatment of her in bed to interfere with her understanding of the harsh fact that it somehow wasn't working. He was not...behaving. She would be forced to abandon him to the impersonal hands of professional torturers, no matter how much she desired his continued presence in her bed. Once he solved the problem of Orac...

She had come into quarters, but he did not come out from the work-room to wait on her. He was supposed to wait on her; it was the instruction he had of her. He was testing her again. Both of them knew she would not discipline him for such moderate offences, not when the discipline she had was so immediate and absolute.

When did it change? When did she lose control of him? It could hardly be said she was in control now, not when he defied her so casually, not when he declined to observe the forms when it did not suit him to do so. When?

She moved through quarters to the lab work-room door, desperate in a quiet, frustrated way to understand exactly what was going on. Not long ago, she had been so certain of him. He had been so polite and plastic to her whims...

He sat at his work-table with his back to her, working, Orac in all its imponderable and quite useless silence on the table in front of him. The control was so close to her hand, on the jamb of the door. She could touch the switch, and he would suffer for the sin of having



disappointed her, for the crime of having too deeply satisfied her cringing, concealed fantasies in bed.

She could remember how it was when she had shown him before. And if she took that step, he would be as useless to her for hours as Orac presently was. There was no reason to countenance delay. The longer he was here, the more she resented him for his absolute failure to live up to her vain dreams of vengeance and possession, even while he earnestly applied himself to the forms of living up to them. She said his name, to get his attention, to let him know he had not gotten away with ignoring her entrance -- as if he didn't know he'd misbehaved.

"Avon."

And yet, it seemed by his perceptible start that he had not been aware of her behind him, that he had genuinely not heard the signal. She wondered whether she could trust his apparent honesty. He would not have pretended startlement if he had deliberately ignored her. By his sullen behaviour, he would have challenged her to accuse him of wilful disobedience, challenged her to turn on the lights.

"Serva..."

He half-rose from his seat, turning in his place to look at her. He only just in time stopped from using the forbidden name, and there was no mocking pretense in his voice. She could really believe he was caught off his guard; he had been careful, even through his insolence, to avoid transgressions for which she might invoke her punishment. "Your pardon, Commissioner. I did not hear you come in."

All right, she would believe him -- this one time. She entered the work-room, curious -- now that she knew she'd have to give him up -- to see what he was doing, to see what progress he had made toward accomplishing his task. It hadn't mattered so much to her before. As long as she had meant to keep him, the swiftness of his solution to the puzzle had not been the issue it had just become.

"Show me what you're doing, Avon. I begin to worry. It's taking you so long to replace this one piece of equipment."

His genuine surprise saved him from severe displeasure, but did little to mute her irritation. She didn't like looking at his face, with its dull grey eye-cup. And he was beginning to decline to shave, only because he knew she preferred it otherwise.

"I... Well, I hardly need to explain it to you. As you know, I have almost succeeded, but my latest stratagem gives only incomplete access, and Orac cannot be intimidated as easily as I can these days. Therefore, there is no getting out of him how best to engage his external access relay circuits."

Not too different from what he had reported the last time she bothered to ask. Still, there was something a little odd about his choice of words...

"It's about time you made some progress. I was really beginning to wonder whether all those fulsomely glowing reports in the official Federation files were false after all." She could well afford the taunt; he would expect it, would be disappointed if she failed to produce.

"But unless you credit me with Auron psi-abilities..."



The sneer was deliberately chosen. For reasons she could not begin to fathom, the Auron -- Cally -- had been somewhat more important to Avon than Avon liked to think anyone could guess. The subtle flinch he almost managed to suppress was gratifying in its confirmation of her paradigm; and she continued, her triumph at having scored a hit rounding her words with a fine fat flourish of self-satisfaction. "...I fail to perceive how you could assume that you 'hardly need explain,' when I've not spoken to you about this since yesterday. Well? Any ideas?"

Avon had turned, and sat back down at his work-place. She admired the way the blue with which she'd dressed him lay against the rich colour of his hair. He was elegant; it was a shame he had to go.

"I credit the Commissioner with minimal intelligence." His tone was bored, deliberate and dismissing. Having been startled and having recovered, he was ready to pick a fight. Obviously. "Any idiot can see there are security surveillance cameras here. Of course, you are kept up-to-date on this project. I should think your superiors are most interested."

Well, of course, her superiors would be "most interested" -- if they ever got a hint, before it was too late. They would be fascinated, in fact.

"Internal surveillance monitors for my safety. You would hardly expect a good security section to leave a Federation Commissioner unprotected..." She was behind him, close behind him, drawing the edge of one long nail across the back of his neck. He didn't like being scratched; that was why she did it. "...in her private quarters? There isn't any telling what might come of that."

"No more than I'd expect there not to be an internal affairs auditor somewhere in the organisation. You are too trusting, Commissioner. Do you really believe Federation Command does not already know every detail of this little charade of yours?"

She could hear the irritation in his voice. She smiled. She liked to be reminded of how easily she could get under his skin. "Of course, Avon." His irritation had proven very valuable to her, as a matter of fact. She was certain he would have kept his very good point to himself -- if he'd been thinking about it. "Naturally, my superiors are kept fully informed. Security is hardly concerned with the details of my classified communiqués. I suggest you emulate that professionalism and get on with it."

His shoulders slumped in defeat and resignation. She'd won again. He'd take it out on her in bed -- oh, in such subtle ways that she could not accuse him, of course. But that was just another aspect of her victory.

Howsoever incomplete and empty it might feel, it was still victory...

"I'm tired," Avon said. "I can't work any longer. My head... Eye-strain... You said something about narcotics?"

"And you said something about Hell freezing over. Am I to conclude that improbable condition has been satisfied?"

He pushed himself away from the work-table and stood up, facing one wall, the heels of his hands pressing against his eyes with every appearance of a man whose pain has finally gotten



the better of him. "Well, there is at least a frost," he admitted. "I'm tired of fighting it. Give me the drugs, Commissioner. There's no sense in unnecessary pain."

"Oh, absolutely." Maybe he would come around after all; maybe she would not have to discard him -- yet. If he was humbled by the chronic pain of constant eye-strain, after these few weeks, it was not beyond the realm of possibility that he would see his way clear to true submissive obedience before too long... "I'll go call the doctor right away. Go and lie down, rest yourself."

He could have his drugs, his respite and his rest, once she finished one or two little chores, once he had expressed his gratitude for her generosity in some suitably humble -- and intimate -- manner.

But first, she rather thought she'd call her surveillance section. Confident as she was of the loyalty of her people, no one who'd come as far, as fast, as Commissioner Sleer would let herself fall into the same trap she had so often set for others -- that of trusting anybody's loyalties.

No messages went out that she did not carefully examine for content and innocuous intent.

But that wasn't any reason to take chances...

"Thank you, Commissioner."

Head lowered and shoulders slumped with weariness, Avon left the room as he was bid, to go lie down and await further instructions.

She was glad he'd decided to accept the drugs. He'd be much more comfortable, much more manageable from now on...

She had to do something about surveillance, before Avon had the solution, before Orac was operational.

Once Orac was operational, she would be invincible.

She could not afford to jeopardize her hope of invincibility so close, so close to realization.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janel Sibbet knew there was no reason to be irritated with her staff. It wasn't their fault, and she couldn't even explain why she was so on edge, since she could hardly confess or admit to watching restricted tapes in the first place.

So they would have to endure unfair treatment; that was all there was to it.

The work order ticket was on her desk when she started her shift, and the odds were that Under-Technician Roe had enough interpersonal stress to last him if he'd taken the order, but she couldn't stop for rational considerations like that. She set her drinktab down and picked the work order up, rising before she'd finished sitting down, descending upon the unfortunate Roe where he sat cringing in obvious anticipation of an unpleasant scene at his work station.



The other technicians in the section expected fireworks. So much was obvious from the overly casual way in which people closed doors, turned up the volume in their sound-domes, hunched over access boards with looks of exaggerated concentration.

She reached Roe's place and slapped the order down in front of him. "Perhaps you'd be so kind as to explain this?"

She hardly expected to surprise him, not when she had seen him watching her out of the corner of his eye since she'd come in. His baleful expression reminded her of a pet cat in a bad mood, as it rolled its eyes so one saw the whites. "The Over-Technician was not available, ma'am, and the instruction was 'voco.'"

It behooved one to be ultra-formal when one was in deep shit. Janel approved. "But the Commissioner doesn't have the vocal order authority for this, Roe, and you did it anyway. I don't want to have to fight with Internal Audit over it. I don't like fighting with Internal Audit. Those people give me an allergic reaction."

He grew more pale at the mention of the internal police agency. "The Commissioner stated that urgent reason intervenes. I do not have the authority to decline the Commissioner's instructions when urgent reason is cited."

Nor, indeed, did she. "Urgent reason? Is she on record?"

Roe looked down at the work order, in an apparent panic. "Of course, she's on record. Do you think I'm... It must be on record. I took the order. I wouldn't have forgotten to document it..."

She'd laid it on too thick; overstressed, he was missing the evidence that was right in front of him. "Good man," she said, and laid her hand reassuringly on his shoulder. "There's the tape file, just as it should be. I should have looked a little harder before I came down on you, Dickon."

It was there -- the file reference for the record supporting the voco override. She had never seen it used, so she'd not noticed it; he'd done well, had Roe, but she wasn't sorry she'd gone on the rampage. It added a little excitement to everyone's day, and Roe seemed too relieved to hold it against her. She hoped he wouldn't hold it against her. Because she was in the wrong; she'd flown off the handle because she'd not been sleeping well.

"What a relief." Far from resentful, he sounded grateful, as if she'd done him a favour by discovering he'd done his job correctly. "I was worried there for a moment. I didn't know what to do, not when the Commissioner was on the line. Should I have handled it differently?"

He was careful and politic; now that he was out of danger, he would ask her advice, give her a graceful exit without loss of face. That was the advantage in dealing with professional people. "She doesn't like to be kept waiting. I discovered that for myself." The day Avon had called for the yacht's status. "No, I don't guess there was anything else to do but take the order. Has the job been completed?"

"All of the monitors in the Commissioner's quarters have been removed for cleaning and maintenance." He had the status of the work order on his screen before she finished with the question. "No auxiliary monitors have been brought on line, per the voco. Reinstallation will take place in five shifts. She didn't put a rush on it."



"Good work." Well, now that she'd made a complete ass of herself, she could just take the work order and go back into her office to blush for a while. A week, maybe. "Carry on."

Flushed with the adrenaline rush no less than with simple humiliation, she sat down in her office, sipping her drinktab, staring at the work order for long moments before the obvious question surfaced in her mind. Finally.

The question wasn't why Roe had accepted the work order.

The question was why the work order was there in the first place.

It had been another seemingly meaningless work order that set her off in the first place, she remembered -- the business about the Commissioner's lights. She'd wondered, but it didn't pay to wonder, so she'd put it out of her mind. Then it had been the power failure, and she hadn't pursued that because she'd known she had the records available for whenever she got bored enough and curious enough to watch them, which was -- technically speaking -- a breach of security that would put her under suspicion again, but she wasn't worried.

Then there had been the question of the Commissioner's private yacht, and the voice in the Commissioner's private quarters, and the memories that had driven her to watch the tapes as soon as she could free herself a little time and privacy to do so. Now, the surveillance cameras were to be removed, and to Janel, that meant only one thing. But it didn't make any sense.

Outside her door, the section was busy. They'd be fully occupied for a while, between not wanting to call attention to themselves while she was in her obviously foul mood and needing to gossip among themselves. She called the section of tape up to her private viewer and played it without sound, enhancing at the appropriate moments almost without thinking about it.

She'd run this bit of tape so often she knew its three-point-four-seven minutes of action almost by heart. She replayed it in her dreams, from the first long shot of the transport party crossing a junction to the steady shot as they carried Avon down the straight hallway nearest the Commissioner's quarters, to the closer view of Avon unconscious and secured, being restrained by orderlies -- as if an unconscious man needed to be restrained -- while the physicians worked the secures on the door.

It was the last shot that was the most damning. He was directly beneath the surveillance lens, and since his head had fallen back to face the ceiling, she could see -- and there could be no mistake.

Avon. He was older, yes. His hair had gotten longer, and there was less softness in his face to smooth the unforgiving power of his skull. She'd never seen him in an open collar. They'd put him in an infirmary smock, and even through the vulnerability she felt represented by the soft nakedness of his throat, she recognized him for a harder man than she'd known. It was clear in the way his face had changed, the even-unconscious pride that overlay his upper lip, the lurking demons of scorn and despair that rested at the corners of his mouth.

She had been so taken with him -- once. She had seen him fall into a trap he had constructed for himself out of arrogance and greed, and she had sorrowed to see him fall even while she understood the source of his frustration. Even when he caused her so much fear, and some



pain, and years of waiting for official history to forget she had ever been associated -- on howsoever professional a level, for howsoever brief a time -- with the criminal, now revealed as terrorist, Kerr Avon.

Without the voice to back her up, she might have told herself she was mistaken. She could have convinced herself that it could not be the man she remembered. And she might have succeeded, and been safe.

As it was, she was trapped as surely as he had once been, and there was no way around it.

There had been something wrong with his eye. A material of some sort covered it. His right eye. A sensitivity to light was clearly indicated, in view of the modifications the Commissioner had made. But why would she now decide to shut down all surveillance, an action bound to arouse the suspicion of Internal Audit?

It wasn't that Avon was her prisoner, in her quarters. That couldn't be it. They'd had days to pick up on it; the Commissioner would feel safe from that angle. No, something worried her, maybe a special project, but that didn't make sense either, since he would logically have been working the problem all along. It couldn't be anxiety on her part that Avon would somehow escape, either; she would never have him in her quarters if she wasn't confident he was completely at her mercy.

Was it the light?

The doctor had mentioned sedation, and even under the low light, Avon's eye had been covered. But the spectrum the Commissioner had her lighting converted to was at a lower range, and less saturated. Less bright. Something prevented him from going out into the corridor, and if it was his sight, the Commissioner did have him; she had him fast. All he was depended on his vision.

Sleer had him trapped, like an animal in a cage, like a rabbit in a snare...

There was something true and real there, something dangerous and hidden, so powerful it made her heart leap in astonishment. What could it be? She had been thinking about traps, about cages, snares, rabbits...

The problem and the solution, both at once.

Avon had never been a hare, a hound, a driven stag. He was a predator, merciless and ruthless in his hunt -- whatever he sought, for whatever reason he sought it. A hunter and a solitary carnivore, a wolf, a catamount, a coyote. Legendary creatures from the Terran past, characterized by their fierce will to survive. A wolf would chew his own leg off to escape a trap...

And Avon was imprisoned by the light.

The Commissioner had no reason Janel could guess for suddenly deciding on a risky move. There was a logical explanation for the action; Avon had worked her around to it somehow. Avon had a particular reason for wanting the monitors down for a few days...

It was all beautifully logical, exquisitely logical. Characteristically Kerr Avon.



But he couldn't fly the yacht, not alone, not forever. And if he was to be hunted from here, the interrogation staff would never believe she hadn't been involved in some way. Not when she was the point of contact, the one to bring the craft on line. Not when she was the one the Chief Medical Officer spoke to, not when her entire staff would remember she was all too emphatically aware of when the monitors were taken off line.

She would need extra rations. She would need extra medical supplies. She would need what pieces of her life she could remove from her quarters without tipping anyone off. She should probably equip herself as if she were going into the woods...

If she made ready to go into the woods, they would look there for her first. She had no notion when Avon would make his move...

She dropped the security tape into the recycler. It didn't matter any more.

Her section was accustomed to seeing her leave her office and head for the drinktab dispenser. They'd hardly notice if she declined to return.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kerr Avon examined his weapons, ranged out on the workbench in front of him precisely in their order of expected use. A timer. A key, one that should serve to activate Orac, as it already had once before. The implement, borrowed from his meal tray and therefore of limited usefulness; they would miss it if it was not with his leavings when they came to pick those up. The medication prescribed by Servalan's physician, for his eye-strain. Did the physician have the first idea of how oddly appropriate that would turn out to be?

Servalan allowed him no time pieces, no chronometers. He constructed one in secret, in her absence -- a time piece in only the most primitive sense, but one which did give him the degree of control, of certainty, he required. He knew she would not be content with him for much longer. He carefully chose a global window of opportunity located precisely between the latest he could reasonably expect the monitors to be active and the earliest she would really start to wonder about Orac. As for the system-specific constraints -- her gaolers gave him a constant minimum of twenty time-fractions, on his chronometer, in which to consume his meal before they came back and threatened to turn on the lights unless he returned the tray, intact, with its full complement of material implements.

Servalan surely suspected he had a key for Orac, although he carefully refrained from actually engaging Orac until he felt he could risk doing so without detection -- once she'd taken up his hint about surveillance.

He had considered all his options.

And he was running out of time.

His supper lay discarded in a corner; Orac sat in front of him on the table. Kerr Avon took a deep breath, knowing what he faced, and dreading it no less for his absolute certainty that there was no other way out.

He slid the key into place. "Well, Orac? Have you completed the analysis I requested?"

He'd been surprised, two days ago, at how pathetically welcome he'd found Orac's voice -- the



closest thing to a friendly voice he'd heard in weeks, his only tie, however mechanical, to people who were now unquestionably dead, opportunities irretrievably lost. But he felt stronger now, and Orac was just a machine.

"I have. You are already fully apprised of the only rational conclusions. So much was clear from your original inquiry."

Still, if Orac was not quite a voice from a more gentle past, it was the only other voice he had heard in weeks, apart from Servalan's. Accordingly, it was rather pleasant in and of itself. "Then it can be done. My analysis was correct."

There was a moment of silence that would have been reluctance -- in a human. "Your analysis is correct. The flight program is ready to be loaded, and the information you requested will be transmitted upon departure. Are you quite sure you can carry through?"

He ignored the question; after all, Orac would know one way or the other soon enough. And the chronometer continued to mark the ever-smaller margin he had to stop and indulge himself in second, in fifth, in eighteenth thoughts about what he had planned, about his only viable hope for escape and freedom. "And you can make up whatever deficiencies I may have as a pilot. Since I haven't a pilot at this point."

There was no hesitation this time, but whether it was Orac's peculiar programming presenting the image of arrogance or a simple conviction of analysis, Avon did not know. Nor did he care.

"That will be no problem. Get us both to the escape craft, and we can successfully be away from here within five hours' time. The Phoenix asteroids will provide all necessary cover, but, to remind you, we must first reach the escape craft."

Yes, of course. It was time for the next in his series of weapons, and he realized he had set them down out of order. Once he was determined, he could risk the drugs. He'd told her they were for eye-strain...

The eye-strain troubled him mightily, but that wasn't what he'd wanted to get the drugs for. Not as she would have thought. Not quite so directly.

He checked the dosage and the other information coded with the medication, and made his decision. Now, or never. He took a substantial dose, an adequate dose; he had to be able to function, but he had no intention of suffering more pain than was absolutely required. He had minutes yet before the drug hit his system and slowed him down, minutes in which he must take measures whose result would absorb all of the disorientation, leaving him -- he hoped and trusted -- with a relatively clear head and a fairly good grip on himself.

With luck.

"All right, Orac." A bargain was a bargain. They had agreed. "I'll get us out of here if you will keep us safe."

"I hardly think the actions you are contemplating can be subsumed under that heading of security..."

But Orac was just babbling, and Avon was already tired of hearing from him. He cut the voice



off in mid-rant and picked up the spoon.

There was so little time, and he had already studied the problem exhaustively. Second thoughts, yes -- but there was the one overriding conviction that Servalan would have him dead before too long. Orac had assured him it would work, and he had to free himself from her tyranny, no matter what the cost.

He had been thinking on his action for weeks, almost since the moment he realized the trap, expecting at every moment for them to realize how simple it was, how obvious an escape they'd left him. Orac had already given the clinical appraisal.

He shouldn't have discarded the meal they'd brought; he was going to need all the rations he could find -- but he knew he was going to be sick to his stomach, so it hardly made much difference. All depended on having enough time to master himself again before Servalan returned. If he was unable to prevent her from giving the alarm, she would just send him off to be tortured to death for insignificant information, and that would defeat the whole exercise.

He turned the spoon over in his fingers, once again testing for its weight and its centre of gravity.

The nerve was already damaged, and would tear with minimal force; Orac had checked that for him first thing, tapping into his medical records. If he used the proper angle, the reflexive reaction to the pain he expected would give the instrument enough of a sudden jerk to accomplish what he might not be able to do otherwise, if his nerve failed. The grey eye-shield would surely fall away, but the light in the work-room was low, and he had to take the chance; he had to risk it, had to gamble on the odds, be confident he would not be crippled by the agony before he ended it...

By crippling himself.

Oh, he had been alone before, but never so alone as now, never for years, for decades, for centuries... It was good to be alone. No one would try to argue him away. No one was there to pity him, in pain, to suffer with him -- or because of him.

His hand shook with his fear, his absolute conviction overriding the knowledge of what he meant to do, the knowledge that resided in his flesh. He took a deep breath and held it, his eyes squeezed shut in one last battle for control.

If Vila were here, I could have a drink... A man might be excused for wanting to have a drink at a time like this...

His hand was steady now. He set the edge of the spoon to the corner of his eye, his right eye, the one that represented the invisible prison of visible light in which Servalan kept him. A little pressure to set the edge -- cold, and feeling impossibly thick -- inside the jealous muscle of the lid, angled down to pass the barrier of bone set there to protect what had become his greatest liability.

Such pain there was in just that little beginning... Will I be able to carry it through...?

He had no choice.



There was barely enough time remaining. The spoon had to be returned with his meal tray, and that meant he had to give himself lead time to master his reactions -- a little -- and to clean up, so they would not be alerted, so they would not alert Servalan. He felt the first dreamy invasions from beyond his consciousness, sensed the approach of the effect of the narcotic.

Now! Now, or it might as well be never...

Pressure, and the familiar gesture common to the use of spoons made awkward by the unnatural angle and the unnatural purpose to which it was being put. The grey shield fell away, and there was bright, blinding agony. He had to complete... He had come so far to be free, he could not let go, he had to complete...

And then there was no light, no searing anguish. There was only pain.

Only pain, and a good deal of blood, and Avon lay on his belly on the floor for long moments, trying to catch his breath, sobbing aloud in the privacy of his prison, in the aftershock of violence, pain, and the unspeakable horror of what he had just done.

But it was done.

And now, he could be free.

The basin of water was ready by the door, and the towelling he had brought from the lavatory. She had a fine eye for good linen, had Servalan, whether it was a genuine appreciation on her part or simple understanding of the quality represented by expense. The hand-towels she kept for herself were tight-woven, thin, well-washed to a soft flexibility -- just the thing a man might want to provide pressure, halt the bleeding long enough for him to find the spoon where it had dropped, to wash it clean and set the tray complete, innocuous, through the hinged slit at the bottom of the door, making quite certain no blood dripped to his hands to leave its tell-tale stain.

Only a few more steps, a few more hours. Servalan would come back to quarters; Orac would verify there had been no alarm. He would silence her, so she would not give an alarm. The bleeding would stop by then. He had already set out the emergency medical kit, and additional supplies waited for him after he took her personal yacht and left.

He had not yet decided whether he was going to kill her.

Suddenly exhausted by the sustained effort, his struggle for control even through the pain, Avon sat down with the emergency medical kit and pulled out the sealer-skin in its pressurized container.

It hurt more than he had expected, that was true.

But he would be Servalan's meek prisoner no longer.

\* \* \* \* \*

She could afford to wait only so long before the monitors would have to be replaced. It was a pity, because if she had more time -- now that Avon had accepted the narcotics, now that he had succumbed to the lure of drugs -- she was certain she could train him perfectly well. If







only she had time.

The problem with her hold on him was that the punishment was too extreme to be invoked on ordinary grounds; it was almost as worthless to her as no weapon at all -- except, of course, that it did permit a certain level of control. Once he started on the drugs, she could use them for more minor punishment, the threat of withholding them running the adjusted range of discipline from simple exposure to the headaches born of eye-strain -- which would only do for so long, since an eye eventually adjusted -- to that of clinical withdrawal from a highly addictive drug, with all its attendant horrors.

Now that he had started to take the drugs, if only she had two more months with him, three months with him... His manners would certainly improve...

Oh, she could almost hear his voice right now. \*Please, Commissioner. I must have the medicine, let me have the medicine, please, Commissioner...\*

She heard Avon's voice as she came into quarters. Avon's voice, from his work-room. Who would Avon be talking to, if not Orac? And if he had Orac on line, perhaps she could have it after all, as she had fantasized. She stood in no danger from internal audit with Orac's resources on her side...

"Status," Avon said. He hadn't heard her enter, surely; otherwise, he'd have shut Orac down. Was he truly so absorbed in the problem that he'd not heard the warning tone? It didn't make sense that he'd let her know up front when he got through to Orac -- not unless Avon already knew what she had reasoned, that she would not be able to protect him much longer unless she got Orac to help her through.

There was a chance he had done just that, made his analysis. Wasn't it one of the things she valued most in him, his ability to judge his situation with clear-eyed reason, and to make the choice of best options unaffected by purely personal emotions? Either way, he was talking to the computer. She could hear Orac's response, even through the closed door to the work-room. She would surprise him at his work, and he would not be able to deny it, not with the witness to his success still audible.

"Chances of success are now approximately eighty-seven percent. It depends entirely upon your ability to make the best of unexpected circumstances."

"Define 'unexpected.' I haven't very much time."

"There are personal factors of which you have not been apprised, which materially impact the progress of your planning."

She opened the door to go in, and Avon, his back to her, pulled the key with a convulsive movement. "Too late, Avon," she said, and his head drooped as if in resignation as he reluctantly set the key back in. Something was wrong, there was a smell...

There was blood.

Orac was on line again, and Avon addressed it, but Servalan scarcely more than registered the fact that he was speaking because of all the blood. Splashes and spatters, stained scraps of linen... A suicide attempt had always been one of the possible avenues, but surely Avon would not be on his feet after a suicide attempt. Surely he would have managed to carry through, if



he made the attempt at all.

She snatched the light control out of its socket in the door-jamb and advanced into the room. She was having no suicide attempts, nothing to interfere with her new triumph, now that she could have both Avon and Orac. One false move from him, and she would invoke the light, held in reserve in this, his sanctuary, available to her at a single touch. She'd just see what this nonsense of his was. Blood, and Orac. Was it possible he still did not understand he was beaten?

"As I was saying. There is one additional factor that could not have been easily predicted. You should be aware that there is a technician already waiting for you on board..."

"Avon."

She waited until Orac was in mid-spate to call his name, to demand his attention. As a minor demonstration of her authority, it was, she had found, a quite useful tactic from time to time. "I think you have some explaining to do, and it had better be good. Turn around."

She heard Orac only indistinctly, behind her own words. The yacht, she thought; Orac was talking about the yacht. Whatever the man had in mind, he was clearly confident he was going to take her personal ship after all. Too bad for Avon. He would never get from her door to the launch bay.

Avon turned toward her slowly, as if reluctant. There was something different about him. He had a band of cloth wrapped around his head, a band she had not seen before because he'd had his head down. A band of cloth -- bloodied, like the towelling by the basin on the floor, like the floor and the furnishings themselves -- a band that passed around his head, above his left eye, crossed his right eye to hold a blood-red wad of once-white linen there...

She took a step backwards, away from him, stunned with horror and disbelief. It was so simple, so self-evident -- and she had never given it a thought. Even when she had considered his option of suicide, and taken steps to prevent it, it never occurred to her that there was another option, more extreme, but less insane.

His eye. She had trapped him, controlled him, kept him, with the weakness in his eye. And it was funny, really; she could be amused. It was such a rational response to his predicament, and she had never even considered it because of the primitive horror in her heart -- but he had done it, had put out his eye to be away from her. There was no eye beneath that band and bloodied linen. It was an empty socket, bleeding...

Avon grasped her arm before she could retreat any further and pulled her to him, turning her back to him, to hold her fast against him. The light-control was useless and disregarded in her hand, sick as she was with horror and disbelief, helpless for this once against his strength, his rage, his iron will and determination.

"If thy right eye offend thee..." Avon said.

She knew the quote; it was one they'd both been exposed to in their schooling, an historical literary fragment. No one knew where it originated. But she knew, and he knew, where it ended.

"...pluck it out. And cast it from thee." She heard her own voice, thick with dread, as she



finished the line. He expected her to finish it. He would be disappointed with her if she failed...

He was not disappointed. He smiled at her, a brilliant, twisted grimace of unnatural mirth only half perceived on the side of his face she could bear to look at.

"Yes, well, it's nice to know we're reading from the same script, Servalan. Pick Orac up."

Unfortunately, Avon was correct. They were reading from the same script, the same scenario. They both knew she couldn't get around it. It was as certain as she had been, when she had ordered him brought to her, when she had planned to use him to her purpose.

But by analogy, there might yet be a twist she would find, some loophole that would save her life and stop his escape in her private yacht. If only she could keep her mind on things, if only she wasn't sickened by the stink of his blood...

She turned to the machine she had gone through so much to obtain, only to have it taken from her time and again. "Shall we go?"

He didn't have a weapon, not yet. All he had was his proximity to her. She could easily get away from him in the corridors.

"In just a moment. Orac?"

"The alert has been processed. Earth Central Security will arrive within point-seven-one time units of anticipated clearance."

He'd already had thoughts of his own; so much was obvious. It reduced her chances of turning the tables -- and, in her present condition, she was almost too numbed with shock to care.

She almost didn't notice when he hit her.

She only barely realized she was losing consciousness before the black void swallowed her up, whole and entire.

\* \* \* \* \*

Only a few hours, perhaps as much as two days, but Janel had already had more than enough time for second thoughts -- and rather too many of them for her liking. It hadn't been all that difficult to get into the launch bay; she knew the base codes, and had consulted the network of restricted access maintenance tunnels before making her move. It had been rather more difficult to get into the yacht itself, but she had managed to mimic its command array long enough to get in and get it shut up again.

She'd had no contact with the outside world since she locked herself in, so she had no way to be sure her disappearance was being interpreted as she hoped, no way of knowing whether the selection of clothing, supplies, and extra rations now resting secured and still fully assembled in the cargo bay of the yacht had been taken, together with the incoherent note she had agonized long hours over, to create the impression she intended it to create, of a woman under too much pressure, whose sense of duty and ability to reason had deserted her, who had fled the evil influence of a corrupt administration for the primitive purity of dead winter on Gauda Prime.



If it had worked, then dead was precisely what they would expect her to be by now. The winters in the temperate zone of the planet were characterized by bitter cold and a particularly large species of carnivore that came down from the mountains to scavenge for food; and whether or not it was noted in her official records, Janel knew she really didn't have the first idea of how to go about making a fire.

Well, apart from the obvious, of course. One had to have fuel and oxygen, and a way to contain the area of combustion. And there were quite probably rules of thumb about stacking branches for maximum draft and best fuel consumption ratios... But what they might be was beyond her.

As was what she could expect to do, now that she'd secreted herself on board the Commissioner's private yacht. It all depended on her grasp of Avon's reasoning, and why should she have guessed what he had in mind? She'd worked with him once, for less than a year, more than four years ago. There was no reason why she should imagine she could read his intentions. And even if she could, how would Avon react to her presence?

She'd had ample time to worry the question in the long, dark silence of the waiting hours.

But then the yacht's computer systems activated.

Janel awakened from an uneasy sleep to the unaccustomed hum of machinery breaking the silence for the first time since she'd made her way on board. At first, she stayed frozen in her hiding place, certain in her confused, half-dreaming state that the sounds she heard were security guards coming for her. They had found her, they were coming for her, they were going to take her away and interrogate her to death...

Time passed, however, and the noises remained the same, and there were no security troops. As she woke more fully, she realized she had let her fantasy beguile her into a paranoid terror of a quite normal sound -- to wit, a periodic and automatic systems status check, such as performed by all relatively sophisticated organic computer systems on a predefined chronological basis. She should know. She had programmed enough of them. It was her nerves, the uncertainty of waiting... Yes, that was all.

After a while, she managed to nerve herself up to crack open the panel of her hiding place, the commodious storage bin in the reserve crew quarters she had been using as her retreat when sleep became a priority. All clear. Lights were on, yes, but still only the status lights and the rest-phase glims, and there was no sound of human foot or security transmission.

It had to be faced sooner or later. She could hardly let herself get away indefinitely with cowering in hiding, cowering from nothing. And much good she could do for Avon in a locker, even assuming all else went as she'd guessed. She took a deep breath, trying to still her fear, and pushed the door-panel open wide, swinging her legs out into the room as she did so.

Still safe, still no one. Of course, it might not be a random power check. It might be a command initiate sequence, an external preparation signal, which could in turn mean either the Commissioner was about to make use of her private yacht -- in which case, Janel knew, she was better off blowing the craft up now, and herself with it -- or else Avon had coded command initiate on the authority the Commissioner had so incautiously granted him and was on his way here.



She had to know which was the real reason -- if either was the reason at all. And to make that determination, to find that information, Janel had to be at the control centre of the yacht, so she could silently interrogate the displays without creating any anomalous signals that could alert a communications controller within the launch audit area. The flight deck was where she had to be -- and where better, in case she had to destroy the yacht to save herself from falling into security's ungentle hands, than the flight deck?

She'd only been there once before, on her initial tour. It had been dark and silent then. It was bright and busy with lights and computers' beeps and grunts and chirrups now. All that was lacking was a human presence, a human voice; the absence of an intellect to guide all the activity was unnerving. She felt as if she'd wandered into her dream once more, and in this version of it, all people were just ghosts, without impact or even visibility in a world, a reality, now populated exclusively by machines.

She moved forward from the audit onto the flight deck, fingering the rich padding of the flight couches, admiring the expensive equipment. Clearly the Commissioner was accustomed to only the very best of everything.

She got as far as the primary bank, in front of the forward viewing screen. Then the flight deck spoke to her, a voice coming from all outputs at once, saying her name and dropping her, in her startled fear, into the station's flight couch with the shocking force of a blow to her stomach.

"Over-Technician Sibbet. There is nothing in your record to indicate that you possess the skills required to pilot a craft of this complexity. Is there any information to the contrary not to be found in your official records and similar related documents that you wish to present at this time?"

The voice itself was officious and impatient, arrogant. But somehow, she didn't feel it was Security. Somehow, it sounded less like the voice of an officer or an interrogator than like that of an old-fashioned school teacher. She could detect no threats, either within the question, or behind the question, or within the voice.

After a moment, after waiting for her pulse rate to decline to a point at which she could control her voice, she answered. "My experience has been limited to formal decision systems and engineering and research test modules. This qualifies me for assistant navigator, assistant weapons board, or assistant maintenance officer on most craft up to and exceeding the tonnage of this yacht. Who are you?"

"Only if an experienced navigator, weapons board officer, and pilot are already on board," the voice admonished. "We do not have access to any such personnel at this time. I must therefore supply the deficiencies. Engage all on-line systems at once. There is not much time."

Was it the ship itself talking to her? From the way it talked, it almost had to be a computer system of some sort. It could be the ship -- but she'd never heard a hint of an integrated system complex enough to upbraid her in such scolding tones, complaining as this one had just done about being forced to handle all the critical functions of flight by itself. The auto-circuits were of one level of complexity. What this voice seemed to think of itself was something quite different.

Janel rose from her seat, her knees a little wobbly. This was just too much excitement for her by half, and that was all there was to it. How did she get herself into this mess in the



first place?

She walked into it, that was how, and of her own free will. Idiot that she was. She began to activate the on-line systems. "You have not yet identified yourself," she reminded the voice. "Who gave the order to prepare this craft for departure, anyway?"

It took the voice a moment to process her request. "I am Orac. Please do not interrupt me again. I have much work to do if we are to escape successfully, and Avon will not be able to contribute much in the way of assistance. Do hurry with the on-line systems."

Little enough information, but sufficient to answer her most pertinent concerns. Whoever or whatever Orac was, he or it was acting in concert with Avon, to escape on this yacht. She had been right, after all, and this comfortable confirmation almost made up for her trepidation over what Avon's response might be to seeing her here. Even if, by some odd chance, he remembered who she was.

"When do you expect to make the attempt?" she asked, working her way from board to board, only half hoping for an answer. Orac had asked not to be disturbed, and it wouldn't be an issue unless the target was a near time. But it would be nice to know, regardless, one way or the other. And if Orac knew who she was, did that mean Avon would be forewarned about her presence?

"Prepare for immediate departure," Orac replied.

She could hear the sounds of the power train engaging, and there were external noises she'd not heard before. Was someone boarding the ship? She heard sounds in the approach corridor, stumbling sounds, as if one man carried an awkward burden.

No. She was not yet prepared to face it, no. This was too sudden, too soon. She had to sit down and be collected in her heart and in her spirit before she could see Avon.

But she had no time, and he was there.

His face was a nightmare of blood and horror, and even through the terrible aspect of his red bandaging and his hellishly determined expression, she knew he was Avon.

There was nothing to say, nothing to think or feel or do. She was Technician Sibbet once again, no more, no less. "Course and speed, Avon, sir?"

As Technician Sibbet, she knew what had to be done.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, all Avon had to do was get to the yacht and get away. The world was closing in on him -- the pain, the sickness, the nausea he felt in reaction to his injury combined with the still imperfect accommodation he had made to his de facto loss of one eye to enclose him in a blurred bell-jar of distorted reality. Servalan was out of the way, and perhaps she was dead, although he rather hoped she would survive. He had plans for Servalan, but couldn't afford to dwell on his sweet fantasies of revenge. He had to get to the yacht.

Avon picked up Orac and stumbled through the outer room to the door. The yacht. What had Orac said about an additional factor?



Unimportant. He stayed close to the wall for support and direction. He knew where he was going. Orac gave him a locator beacon, but there was Security in front of him, and he was going to be challenged; he was sure of it. He was eminently challengeable, of course -- a man still dressed in a technician's overall, with an obviously extemporized bandage around his head, staggering toward a restricted bay with a uniquely valuable computer. Although there was no way they could know the unique value of the computer.

"Halt! You, there! Where do you think you're going? This is a security area. Where are your clearances?"

He'd planned for this. And still, it was one more thing, one more minor thing, and he could not be sure he had what it took to conquer this one last little obstacle.

Concentrate. He had to concentrate, and, oh, he hurt, even through the haze of drugs and the stern block of his self-discipline.

"I have clearance from Commissioner Sleer. Logged at reference..."

He was losing it. He focussed his one eye on Orac's casing, trying to ignore the dizziness it caused him. "...at reference two-two-four-four-five-one. Consult the record if you have any questions. Now, get out of my way."

When the situation was ambiguous, an injection of arrogant assumption of authority could frequently be called upon to boost his facade to an acceptable range of invulnerability, impervious to questioning. And in this case, as in several before, it seemed to work. At least for a while, at least for the moment -- and at this point, that was all Avon needed.

"Reference two-two-four-four-five-one, confirmed. Carry on."

No, he hadn't quite convinced the security patrol leader, but that reasonable individual was not about to take a chance. Avon went on, ignoring the offer he only half heard following him down the hall. "Just a minute, sir. You look as if you could use a little help..."

Perhaps he needed help. But he didn't want any, and he especially didn't want a security escort nearby in case Servalan regained consciousness.

The yacht was close to quarters, mercifully. He reached its launch bay and stood a moment, his back against the locked access door, admiring the vehicle of his escape. A sleek model, a newer Fleet design, and stinking of money. No, even more than money, of power, and who better qualified for a sharp and subtle appreciation of the combination of money and power than Kerr Avon? It was a beautiful piece of equipment, promising, and he had to get on board and be off. He didn't have time to stand and admire the hull he was about to requisition.

He found the entry lock with its ramp open, waiting, and climbed up into the yacht, his ears straining for any sound of a security post on board, a security alarm in the base.

There was none. Orac had done his job well and thoroughly. Avon locked the access panel and made his way forward to the flight deck, and as he came to it, a woman with the modest braid of an over-technician on her coverall turned in one of the forward station seats, looked at him, and said, "Course and speed, Avon, sir?"



He set the computer down.

"I warned you," Orac noted, almost snidely. "There is an element you did not include in your planning process. You would not stop to listen to me."

He ignored it. The woman had called him Avon, so she knew who he was, and the odds were that his identity had been restricted information. He had no intention of getting this far only to be Servalan's pawn in whatever arcane game she was playing.

But who else would know, who else could have given this woman his name? Wasn't she the slightest bit familiar? Didn't he know who she was, from way back, from long ago?

He had no time for confusion. The best defence required an immediate offence. "Who the hell are you, and what are you doing on my ship?"

She stood, and he could tell she was unarmed. He could see it with hardly any trouble, even while his skull contained such raging torment that seeing at all was beginning to be too much trouble for him. She had known he was coming, had seen him enter; there were surveillance links on the flight deck that monitored the surrounding corridors. Right now, they monitored an increasing level of confusion in the halls -- perhaps Orac's message had gotten through to Fleet Command.

"Janel Sibbet, sir," the woman said. She sounded unperturbed by his fury, and her calm, unruffled demeanour was also somehow familiar. "I worked with you on some of your projects once, years ago. I'm afraid they'd never believe I wasn't in collusion with you this time. I only barely convinced them of it then. I have no choice but to throw in with you."

"Janel..." The name was familiar. Avon frowned, putting the heel of his right hand up to his face, not daring to touch the bandage because of the pain. "But you were never involved. Why are you here?"

He did remember Sibbet, actually. She had been one of the only things that made one of his more difficult projects bearable, but it hadn't been as Anna had accused, not at all. He had no particular interest in Sibbet as a woman. But as a technician... If a man were permitted to bond technicians to him, to marry them when he found them so he could carry them from project to project and be sure of calm, no-nonsense competent support wherever he went...

"Yes, sir, and they believed me about that, as I said. After a while. I have continued to pursue my career. Up until a few days ago, I was the facilities controller on the Gauda Prime base project for Commissioner Sleer."

"Servalan. I've been saying Sleer for far too long. Call her by her real name. Can you pilot this yacht?"

He had to make a quick decision. He was almost certain he remembered her, from years before. And he could clearly see a drinktab on the pilot's console. Janel Sibbet had been all but literally addicted to drinktabs; as far as he was ever able to determine, she inhaled the mild stimulant like air from the moment she rose to the moment she retired. It made a perverse sort of sense. If there were drinktabs, it was likely she was Sibbet.

"No, sir. But the on-board computer -- 'Orac?' -- seems to feel it is more than adequate. And I thought perhaps you might have some ideas of your own, if you were going to escape. For



a pilot, that is."

He picked Orac up again. "Right you are." His decision made, all that remained was to complete his flight as quickly as possible. "Well reasoned, but this is Orac. This will pilot the yacht. Orac. Instruct the computers. Get us out of here."

And for once, there was no answering impertinence... "Very well. Stand by for immediate departure."

Orac would get them away, would see them safe from pursuit, and en route to where he had decided he should go. He had won all, it seemed. It had worked for him. The rest of his crew -- the people he had known, fought with, fought for and beside for so long -- were all dead. But he was away. He would be free.

He could not stand the pain in his head, the pain in the socket where his right eye had been. He could not bear it any longer, drugs or no drugs. Since he was safe on board the yacht, he had no force of will left to sustain him.

He could see the launch bay doors begin to open once he reached the pilot's station. He put Orac in the pilot's seat, secure, where there would be no damage during manoeuvring. Where Orac would be forced to recognize that the survival of the ship meant his survival as much as Avon's -- and Sibbet's, for that matter.

The agony was beyond his conscious grasp. As he felt the power train venting, as the decking shook beneath his feet in a reassuring demonstration of the readiness of fully functioning drives, Avon knew, quite suddenly, that he was going to faint, that he was no longer going to be able to evade his body's response to the insult he had done it. He was losing it. And he was losing it fast. The only question was how soon, and how completely, he was going to lose it...

He shook off the anxious hand Sibbet extended to steady him, determined to sit of his own power or be damned in the attempt. She wouldn't be offended. He pulled the crew seat around with desperate strength and tried to pretend he didn't fall into it instead of sitting down.

"Get us out of here, Orac, before the alarm goes up."

He only vaguely recognized his own voice, a savage snarl of challenge and command.

The darkness beyond the launch bay doors swallowed up his mind and consciousness, and he neither saw nor heard anything more.

\* \* \* \* \*

A familiar sound of voices faded in and out of his perception, a familiar sound of voices quarrelling. One of them Orac. One of them wrong. That wasn't a female voice he knew, but at least it wasn't Servalan. Had he fallen asleep and dreamed it all somehow, racked out in one of the flight couches of the SCORPIO while Dayna or Soolin baited Slave for recreation?

He felt so sick, and there was pain...

The flight couch could not possibly be a SCORPIO couch; it was too comfortable, and on SCORPIO, only one of the stations had every truly been that. Dorian had never carried a crew.



He'd apparently cared about only the one chair he favoured, and they'd somehow never gotten around to doing anything about the other stations. A year's discomfort...

Avon tried to pull the conversation closer, to gain some clues. As yet, there was no convincing evidence to tell him, one way or the other, whether or not he was dreaming.

"...is of no importance whatever to me. It is merely an abstract fact that Avon is in need of medical assistance at this time, and is likely to remain so."

Orac. There was no reason he should not dream of Orac. He'd had three long years with the temperamental machine; he fancied that, with Cally dead, Orac had begun to take her place in his discussions with himself, as the voice of unformed dread within the closed recesses of his mind. Cally used to do that to him, to keep him off balance at first, he supposed. Later, it had been a thing that happened between them simply because they knew each other too well, and as if naturally and spontaneously, she would speak things he would not -- or could not -- say.

Orac was a machine. But Orac taunted him with his "master" and his prevarications and his half-truths and his seventy-eight kilos.

"That's as may be." The woman's voice did seem vaguely familiar, but only marginally so. Amused. Not laughing, no, but amused at something -- at the conflict she felt existed, perhaps? "I'm not arguing with you. But you can't honestly expect me to try to change his bandages for him. He never even let anyone fetch him back a sandwich, not even when everybody else was having supper sent in. Stubborn that way. I can't imagine that's changed enough to matter."

Whoever she was, she was clearly under the impression that she knew him. It was a nightmare, then, a standard sort of anxiety dream either creating or created by the misty anguish that seemed to enfold him.

Hot... He was hot. It was too hot in the room. And his eye hurt.

"I cannot judge the degree of change that may have occurred between your first acquaintance and the present time. I will, however, observe that during the time I have been unavoidably associated with this man, change has taken place, and some of that change has been of a radical and surprising nature. He is awake."

Orac agreed with her. That was only to be expected of a nightmare. He didn't know where he was, he didn't know who she was, he hardly understood what his own name was, and he hurt. He heard a sound, as if of someone rising to approach him -- but she did not come too close. As far as he could tell from hearing her voice, she stood off by a good arm's reach. At his left. She was at his left. Well, that was all right, then.

"Is it true? Are you awake, sir? Is there something I can get for you?"

He saw no reason to surrender his dream. There was no need for him to answer her, whoever she was. Shouldn't he be worried about not knowing?

"The bandage must be changed, regardless of your personal preferences." Orac was scolding, typical of Orac. But there was no hint of who in particular Orac was scolding -- Avon himself, or the woman whose presence he still sensed on his left. "The original treatment was little better than emergency measures. Now that time permits, it must be seen to."



Whatever could Orac be on about? Bandages, first aid...

Enough of these unformed concepts, undefined environments. He was going to wake up now, and go take some medicine for a headache. There could be little danger in taking medicine for a headache. Such moderate dosages were only rarely addictive at all, so he was not giving Servalan any possible toe-hold in his psyche if he only went to take a headache pill.

Servalan?

What did Servalan have to do with whether or not he had a headache?

"He's right, you know." She had a certain tone of voice, a sort of cheerful, confidential tone that said, "You're going to like this every bit as much as I do, so I'm going to share it with you, because misery loves company -- but only miserable company."

There had been a technician once -- a damned, bloodthirsty, hell-spawned creature who could always be found five minutes before he very much wanted to get away, coming into his work-area with the statistics on the latest disaster visited upon them by higher-ups. He had fully intended to kill her some day, as soon as the project was over. He almost thought he remembered mentioning it to her from time to time. Had he ever gotten 'round to it?

He didn't remember. His headache was getting worse, and hell-spawn was talking to him. "You don't look any better than you did six hours ago, and there's still fluid there. You've got to have the bandage changed. It's too close to the brain for you to be able to afford to risk infection. We're in enough trouble as it is."

What was she talking about? He was beginning to get genuinely irritated by the fact that nothing made any sense. He was awake -- he was fairly sure of it. But the same nightmare feeling -- the pain, the unreality, the disconnected feeling of having somehow suddenly stepped into someone else's life -- was still with him.

"I'm going for a drink." The sound of his own voice was oddly muffled in his ears, and his face ached just from opening his mouth.

What was going on? All this while, and he'd not opened his eyes; the world was still dark. Fine. Once he opened them, things would fall back into place. They always did. Napping on the flight deck was like wandering in a maze -- the mind distorted perfectly mundane sights and sounds past all hope of recognition, until some chance bit of perspective brought it all together once again.

Avon opened his eyes, and took in the flight deck in front of him, trying to guess...

Except that there was something wrong with his eyes, something wrong with his right eye. The pain increased, and it seemed as if the eyelid chafed against something unspeakably horrible.

Frowning against the pounding pain in his head, he focussed, finally, with a stern effort of will. One eye worked, at least. That was a good sign. Where in hell was he? This could never be the SCORPIO, but he was awake -- he knew he was awake. The woman was nobody he knew, for all her look of distress and concern, for all the nagging not-quite recognition stirring within him at the sound of her voice...



"I'm afraid you'll need a little help. Like it or not. Be reasonable, Avon. Do it my way."

There was a heaviness, a nauseating moisture, about his face, and with a sickened horror borne of final return to full awareness -- and to all too vividly recreated memory -- Avon slowly raised his right hand, and touched his cheek. He could not bear to touch his eye, not for the horror and the pain. But there was blood on his fingertips when he took his hand away, blood and clear fluid.

Now, he knew what was going on.

Finally, he remembered.

He could not believe it. No, it had to be part of a delusion. It had to be a nightmare, masquerading as the truth. Hadn't he had dreams like this before? Not dreams of disfigurement, not dreams of being crippled, but dreams wherein he remembered some shameful crime only once he was too deeply into its repetition to extricate himself...

"I don't want your help." But that would explain everything -- the dull sound of his voice in his ears, the shattering pain in his head, the fever. Everything except who he was, and where he was, and where he thought he was going, and why he had done this monstrous thing to himself. "I want to know what our status is. Status of our course, status of pursuit. Orac. Report."

Oh, he knew the easy answers well enough; he hadn't lost much by way of continuity. He knew he was Kerr Avon, and he had recently shot Roj Blake, and for excellent reasons. That couldn't explain his presence on an unfamiliar -- and clearly elite-class -- yacht, with a makeshift bandage tied around a hole in his head that he clearly remembered excavating with an unpleasantly blunt instrument.

He had to have a reason for putting himself in this position. Sooner or later, he would remember what it was.

"This vessel is en route to the Impak planet, as stipulated," Orac said tonelessly, almost Zen-like in its obvious lack of interest in the trivial concerns that tormented Avon at this moment. "Pursuit ships were launched, but were evaded by induction of artificial computer malfunction until they could be recalled by Earth Security Command override, as you suggested."

That was all to the good, Avon decided. It was unusual for Orac to credit anyone at all with a useful idea. Perhaps it wasn't quite as disinterested as it would like him to think it was.

"We are free and clear, no indication of detection or parallel course pursuit. You must report to the medical area now. No further delay can be tolerated."

All right, he'd humour Orac, and he was all in favour of a fresh bandage. At least, he thought he was, as long as he didn't have to think too deeply about the issue.

He tried to stand, and the dizziness all but toppled him before he found an imperfect balance and caught his breath. It was worse than he could have imagined, he was sure -- because it was worse than anything he ever had imagined, and he'd had more opportunity to contemplate brutality and pain than he cared to count over to himself at the moment. He was leaning on somebody...



Sibbet... That's right. Sibbet. Odd to see her again, after all this time, but she was to the right of him now, so he wasn't really seeing her at all, was he?

No, he had to take action; he was letting his mind wander. Hysteria. It wouldn't do. He'd better clarify the issue right up front, so there would be no possible future misunderstandings. "Very well. Sibbet will remain here on the flight deck. I'm going. Monitor all communications within range for possible hostile reference, and make immediate report the soonest you hear anything. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

She didn't seem inclined to argue with him, which was just as well. Argue with him about what? The act of standing exhausted him, distracted him, and he couldn't quite grasp where his thoughts had been a moment before.

"The medical area's not far from the flight deck. Orac has made the preliminary analysis. Would you prefer to walk, ride, or perhaps swim?"

Whether or not he could keep his thoughts together, he appreciated the fact that, judging from Sibbet's less than well-connected comments, he was not alone on the borderline of hysterics. It wouldn't do for both of them to lose control of the situation. He was going to have to make more of an effort.

"I can make it on my own, all right. Let's go." There was discontinuity, but he didn't have the strength to chase it down. "I'll want some medication for the fever, and when did you pick up a medical degree? In your spare time?"

Challenge and counter-challenge. That was the way of it, even expressed as subtly as the difference in their positions in the supervisory structure had required. That had been the way of it, with her.

He had known so few people in his life who responded as he did to arcane challenges, who shared the rare and solitary thrill of having made the breakthrough in the program. He'd not wanted to let her out of his sphere of influence when the program ended. A good technician was considerably more important to him than he could imagine a good wife being.

But, of course, it had been out of the question. There had been his suspicions, at the time, that Sibbet looked at him with something other than the same bland, unimpressed attention that had greeted him upon their introduction...

Oh, it was hard to walk with one's head heavy to one side, the shock of trauma inflaming one's skull until the ear protested every little motion, and each beat of a man's reluctant heart sent yet another shining spear of agony through to the weak point in his mind, behind the bandage. Not even trying to concentrate on Sibbet and what little he remembered could keep him far enough away from that ordeal.

He even wondered whether he remembered it at all. Perhaps he was making it all up as he went. But it wasn't enough. It still was not enough, and by the time they reached the clinic berth -- not far, as she had promised, but still more than sufficiently far -- his body shook with dry heaves, reflexive protests against the sickness and the pain, his jaw clamped fiercely shut against the assault of his flesh in a desperate effort to at least keep silent.



At least he could keep silent.

She seated him over a sterile basin, and loosened the bandage from around his head. He could only suffer her nursing without interference because his struggle with himself took all his strength, and he could not move his hand -- pressed stubbornly flat upon the table beside the shallow basin -- to move her hand aside.

The pain was less.

She took the bloody clouts away, and Avon rested with his head turned down, trying to bring his breathing and his stomach back under control. The pressure had been necessary to control the bleeding. But now, most of the bleeding had ceased, and the pressure itself had been a part of his agony; now, it was almost bearable.

She brought things he didn't bother noting, and asked his permission before using an injector, then went ahead and used it anyway. He didn't say one word or the other whether it was all right about the injection, could no longer make sense of her words -- the fever in his brain-box was too high, too hot, too loud with the pounding of his struggling heart against the tender gate of his hearing, with the pounding that deafened him.

She touched his head. He pulled away, a reflex jerk, a start of purest instinct. He didn't want her to touch his head. He most especially didn't want her to get anywhere near his wound, but there was no reason for her to be trying except some abstract whim of hers. She certainly wouldn't involve herself in this unpleasantness on Servalan's behalf.

Or if she was...

Or if she was, it made no immediate difference in this case. Naturally, he didn't want to be handled at all. Naturally, he could expect some treatment would be necessary. He could take care of it himself, but it wouldn't get done quite so quickly if he tried. It would only prolong the discomfort.

Orac had said a word or two about complications and his reservations as to Avon's ability to handle them. Orac would be gratified -- unless Orac had arranged for this woman to be here for Orac's own purpose. Had Orac told him about Sibbet...?

Not that he trusted her, because he didn't. It was a matter of expediency. If she was in Servalan's employ, she would suffer for it as surely as he suffered now. Common sense dictated that he surrender for the moment, and believe, conditionally, that she did only what she was convinced had to be done for his sake.

All the same, it was not easy to keep still.

She did her work in silence, while Avon did all he could to be patient. Anaesthetic washes to clean the socket and deaden the pain; synthetic skin to re-seal the tissue once more, until healing could take place. A new dressing soaked with the same medication, numbing, sealing, once the wound was washed clean. The pain that had fallen away when the pressure of the old dressing was removed did not return, although Avon found himself nervous about the possibility -- another vulnerability in himself to be despised.

She fed him pills and liquid for the fever, and asked him to lie down, and since he was quite



willing by then to lay his head down on the table's surface and collapse, he didn't argue with her. He merely rose, weak and staggering with pain, and started for the flight deck. The couches there reclined. He needed to be there, with Orac nearby.

Orac would not let him walk into a Federation trap, not twice within so short a period. He needed to consult Orac about her.

He barely made it to the flight deck before he fell over. Fortunately, the flight couch was waiting to intercept his collapse.

The drugs, the pain, the fever, the medication, all came together to overwhelm him once more. There was only one thought half formed in his conscious mind before the flesh demanded unconditional surrender.

He really was going to have to see about getting some more sleep. This passing-out routine was fast becoming tediously repetitive.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the quiet of the flight deck, the long hours dragged. Janel Sibbet sat near the wall, her knees drawn up beneath her, her arms wrapped close around her, to keep her horror and her grief safely concealed, safely inside, so the sound of her weeping would not wake him where he lay, so she would not make herself ridiculous in his eyes.

It had not been bad, after the first shock. She found herself capable of sparring with the thing called Orac -- more than a machine, surely, for artificial intelligence could hardly explain personality. Yes, the bandage made his face terrible, but it was not so bad as long as he simply slept.

Or it had not been, before she'd seen for herself.

How could she have been so cheerful? No one had forced her to take him to the infirmary. She had done it of her own free will. She had insisted upon it. And, oh, how bitterly she regretted... Regretted...

She could not finish her thought, and screwed her fist against her mouth to stop her cries. The wound was terrible; she could barely hold her nausea in check at the very idea of remembering it. It was terrible beyond imagining, and she had washed it and dressed it. She could not forget the unpleasant sensation of that raw flesh beneath her fingers, even though she'd rubbed her fingertips raw, fretting them across the padded arm of her chosen perch, trying to erase the tactile memory, even if she could not put the visual memory aside.

It was more than just his wound that frightened her, sickened her. It was his walking, and his weariness, the way he lay half unconscious on the flight couch, pitiful beyond her will to see the helplessness -- and still more dangerous even so than any armed elite troop she had ever seen. She was frightened by his angry, empty socket, frightened by his agony, and afraid of him beyond both measures in a way she'd not expected, not remembered, certainly not anticipated being.

She had never imagined he would seem so ruined, so destroyed, so self-possessed in such depths of despair and desperation. She could hardly stand to look at him as he lay on the flight couch, one knee canted up a bit, one arm dragging down over the arm of the couch to brush the



floor with the motionless fingers of his powerless hand...

She wanted a drinktab, and there weren't any left.

She couldn't permit herself to brood like this. It did neither of them any good, and she knew the dangers of letting herself become lost in contemplation of magnificent ruins. She couldn't let him down by permitting the stark and subtle vision he presented to stand in the way of her common sense, the good, basic practicality he valued so highly in her.

Had valued. Once.

After a time, she unfolded herself from the flight couch and went to interrogate Orac. It didn't take a pilot or an experienced navigator to realize, from reading the equipment displays, that the yacht was on its way somewhere, and at a constant rate of speed. She could make little sense of the coordinates displayed across the navicomps, not without charts to give her a frame of reference. The ship was operating close to its maximum speed, but the fuel reserves were more than adequate, assuming they managed to refuel somewhere during the next few thousand hours of flight time.

Orac had seemed willing to share information before, even if its distracted -- she didn't want to call it state of mind; it was a machine -- had rather interfered with the coherence of its communication. Maybe now that things were quieter, she could get some plain sense out of it -- and not incidentally, some better idea about what it was, and whether it was in communication with the Commissioner and carrying her and Avon straight into a Federation detention zone.

Avon apparently trusted Orac to do as Avon expected it to do. But the man could hardly be considered to be operating at his optimum performance level just at present. He'd let her touch him, hadn't he?

She'd thought it was bad when she had learned of his arrest; she'd been certain her regret was sharper and more poignant than she would ever again feel when she had learned of his crime. Sorrow, regret, recognition... She had thought there could not be anything more to be regretted than to see what the Federation had done to Avon, the lengths to which frustration and insecurity had driven a man of his talent and ability -- and all of these years, she had been wrong.

There could not be anything more terrible than this. They had driven him and trapped him, set on him and pecked at him until his only choice was to be slave or be free, his only chance self-mutilation of a peculiarly horrible and emotionally resonating sort...

This wasn't helping; she had to discipline her mind. She went to stand in front of the pilot's station. Orac was there, where Avon had placed it. A box, no more. A simple box of clear material, an unfamiliar processor, a tangled complex of activity glims that shifted as it spoke. Avon said it was Orac. But what was Orac?

"I've never seen a computer quite like you before." Her own voice was heavy with unspent tears. She had to do better. Avon had always appreciated her equable demeanour, her lack of concern under stress. At least, he had given her to understand that was so. She could not fail him now that he was shattered on the iron crown of his own resolve. "Where are we going, Orac?"



"There has never been anything quite like me. 'Computer' hardly approaches an adequate description. I must caution you, however, that a woman of your limited technical background cannot hope to truly appreciate my many unique capabilities."

Oh, so it felt it had everything under control, and could afford to be expansive. It had been too busy fretting about things to brag to her before. Modest, reserved, and polite. "Oh, you'd be surprised, Orac."

She almost sounded normal to herself. She had to put the thing behind her, set that event of cleaning Avon's wound off into a corner in her mind, together with the feelings of her heart. He wasn't interested in the feelings of her heart. Ruined or no, he would find her feelings of no possible use or interest, and she could not bear that he would think her less strong than she knew she could be for him. "I quite appreciate at least one or two of your unique traits already. Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"You may have heard of my creator, Ensor. I am his masterpiece, but I have sometimes wondered if even he truly realized the extent of the breakthrough..."

If she hadn't been convinced by Avon's reference that Orac was in fact a machine, this display of blithe ego would have convinced her of its organic sentience. She was beginning to feel she had to take stern measures of some sort if she were ever to get its attention back on what she was interested in hearing -- although it was interesting, listening to the ego of a machine.

Of course, it had an ego. It was Avon's machine.

"And how do I know you aren't actually in the Commissioner's employ? I can't be expected to be impressed by you, if you can't even answer a simple question."

"The question is far from being a simple one." At least she'd stopped the spate of self-congratulatory declamation. "You betray your ignorance of the situation. What do you know of a man named Roj Blake?"

She thought she heard Avon shift on the flight couch, and glanced sharply in his direction. But he had only moved his arm, and settled his shoulders at a different angle. It wasn't quite so hard to look at him from his left side; in profile, he only looked exhausted beyond caring, instead of the too-perfect picture of terrible transcendent will presented along with the white bandage on the right.

"A political criminal. Accused of child molestation at one time, I think, although consensus seemed to be that it was a frame."

Perhaps Orac was no longer speaking of itself, but all the same, it was every bit as full of self-conceit, superior of tone and phrase. "The barest possible summation. Kerr Avon once belonged to Roj Blake's crew, and has only recently concluded their professional relationship by shooting the man who was once his leader. That we are now en route to the last known location of a genetic construct of Roj Blake can hardly indicate a healthy state of mind on the part of the man who up until a few weeks ago did his best to stay away from Blake entirely."

A long speech, and too convoluted to be easily interpreted. She seized upon the least strongly ~~stated~~ element within Orac's lecture to give her something with which to come back at it.



"Surely a creation of your wondrous complexity can judge Avon's state of mind adequately well without resorting to indications and implications. You're saying you don't know what's going on. You only know where we're going. You've as much understanding of why as I do."

She'd hurt its feelings. No one who worked with complex analytical systems as long as she had could hope to avoid the almost inevitable anthropomorphization that took place, especially with stubborn systems. But Janel still found herself a little surprised at how easily she accepted this machine's conviction that it was an entity unto itself, not a computer. She knew she'd hurt its feelings. It was obvious from the tone of its voice.

"My systems only measure precise quanta of information. I know where Avon is at this moment. I can tell you his pulse rate, his base metabolism, his oxygen absorption ratios, what you like. A state of mind is not a measurable quantum. I am dependent for such information upon the subjective judgement of those around me."

"Must be why he keeps you." Something Orac said temporarily distracted her from her immediate problems. "You can't try to tell him what you think if you don't make subjective statements. All right, if you won't tell me where we are going, at least tell me how long it will take to get there. I need to know what sort of physical condition he'll be in for the confrontation you so clearly expect, after all."

"Our precise target location will be meaningless to you." And now, it was getting huffy, since she'd not backed down. "You will find it a largely uninhabited planet of relatively temperate climate. Our expected landing site will be on the current autumnal slope of the planet, if we land there at all. You have two hundred hours of elapsed time prior to arrival at upper orbit."

What was this "expected" landing site? Hadn't one been chosen? Didn't they know where they were going? Was that why Orac declined to tell her? Because Orac didn't know? "You were telling me about Avon's physical state. Is, what, eight days going to be enough time for him to regain some of his strength?"

Two hundred hours alone on a private yacht with a temperamental computer and a man suffering a fever and battling the shock his system had sustained in the traumatic loss of his right eye. It was not an especially appealing prospect, but it wasn't as if she could complain. She hadn't asked anyone for permission to include herself on this expedition. And there was yet one question Orac had not answered. She hadn't asked him -- asked it -- yet. She couldn't quite figure out how to phrase it.

"If the fever affects his brain, it will not be sufficient time." Orac sounded reluctant, as if it felt it was sharing a secret with someone not authorized to hear. "He was adequately warned of the possibility of infection. The chances are slight, but they do exist."

It didn't make sense for Orac to feel this information was sensitive. Surely it was an obvious risk. "You haven't told me whether the period is sufficient if there is no infection." Only her second -- third? -- conversation with Orac, and she was already getting tired of having to remind it of the questions it hadn't answered. "If your capabilities extend as far as you seem to think they do, then detail prognosis and the course of treatment for each likelihood."

Silence, broken only by a furious whirring of lights, blinking within the rectangular confines of the box containing the voice that called itself Orac. When she finally got her answer, she



almost felt it was given with the greatest of reluctance -- a concept clearly inappropriate, since she was dealing with a machine.

"The physical trauma will heal adequately within eight days, if you maintain the cleanliness of the socket." The precision of the phraseology was interesting; she'd made no specific reference to physical trauma per se. It was as if Orac did not want to be held accountable for something, some element it did not feel adequate to address. "If infection is communicated to the brain, the recovery phase will either be prolonged or abruptly terminated. I cannot offer any opinion as to the chances of recovery from the severe stress demonstrated by his ability to take so extreme a step."

Oh. They were back to state of mind, then. Why did the computer harp on it so? "Thank you, Orac. If I'm asleep when he wakes, would you wake me, so I can see to his medical care?"

"Very well, but remember what I have said. I have given you fair warning, Technician Sibbet."

Because Orac believed Avon had gone mad.

That had to be the reason for its illogical reticence. It was not, perhaps, an unexpected or unreasonable sort of conclusion to draw from the case presented of a man who would put out his eye because it made him vulnerable. There were only two major problems to be considered, keeping Orac's "feeling" in mind.

First was that a computer could hardly be said to "feel" at all, and was hardly expected to have developed a prejudice one way or the other. Opinions, suspicions, prejudices, beliefs -- these were beyond the range of any computing system.

Second, and more important, was that if Orac thought Avon had gone mad, it only showed how little Orac understood of Avon.

True, she had known him only once, for a few months, and that had been some time gone. But the pressure had been intense at that time, and she had come to feel she knew him, which was why she had been saddened -- but not particularly surprised -- when they told her of his attempted crime.

He would have put his eye out then, had the situation been the same. She had no doubt about it. Wasn't that the reason she had come here in the first place? It was therefore obvious that Avon could not be said to have gone mad. His behaviour and his capabilities, his apparent motivations, had not changed since she first met him, so either Avon had been mad all along -- or he was not mad at all, and never had been.

Janel turned away from Orac at the pilot's station, and lay down on the flight couch nearest to navigation, where she would be closer to Avon if he should chance to wake.

She was quite possibly deluding herself, and knew it. But she didn't think Avon's behaviour was necessarily the slightest bit irrational.

The unthinkable was frequently the only logical thing to do to accomplish a task, to reach a goal. When a man behaved according to the ruthless dictates of cold reason, even when common sense judged him completely helpless against the weight of circumstance, the easiest thing to do was decide he was mad. It shielded one from the too clear understanding of one's own lack of perseverance, steadfastness, courage in adversity.



Avon had always had the strength to stare unblinkingly into the sun, like an unhooded eagle considering the heavens as its prey.

She did not think he would look less insolently at the face of Heaven just because he now looked with only one eye.

\* \* \* \* \*

Avon had not kept count of his wakings between sleeping, or of the reluctant journeys to the medical berth to receive treatment. He only knew there had been several -- and none had come as this one, accompanied by the sound of someone snoring.

Since Orac was incapable of a snore, that must necessarily mean Sibbet was asleep, the first time it had happened. Avon was just as glad if she was asleep. She had been at him constantly, carefully keeping herself on his left side, anxious to tend his wound and care for him. He hadn't planned on anybody having to share the burden of what he had done, and would have preferred it had she not felt it her place to intrude. His wound was his own business, like his life and what he had decided with Roj Blake. He would take care of his own problems without help from her, now that it was better, now that the fever had gone down and the pain retreated to the point where he was once more capable of washing the socket out efficiently.

Moving carefully, so as to avoid waking her, Avon turned to put his feet to the decking and stand up. He was steady on his feet once more -- which was good to know. The medical berth was only a few yards removed from the flight deck, for all that it had seemed so far away before. He closed the door behind him and secured it before he turned on the venting fan and went to clean his injury.

The sequence was habitual by now, although he himself had not performed it as often as she had for him. Basin, cleansing fluid, the medication, towelling, clean bandage -- reduced by now to a modest little lump of white sterile fabric. He supposed the socket would soon be healed. It would then be time to think about a patch or a prosthesis.

He couldn't in all practicality consider a prosthesis. There were only a limited number of facilities competent to prepare an artificial eye, and Servalan -- or her successors -- would certainly have a watch out for a dangerous wanted man, a one-eyed terrorist. Life with one eye was infinitely preferable to the stupid risk of placing himself in such a vulnerable position, especially after having worked so hard to get himself out.

No. An eyepatch, perhaps, rakish and piratical, but for the nonce, the little wad of cotton would serve his purpose just as well as anything else he could think of.

Avon loosed the band that crossed his forehead, over his right eye-socket, and let the old, soiled compress drop of its own weight into the basin. He could look at himself in the mirror now; before, there had been only Sibbet's carefully neutral face, with its undermask of frantic horror.

There had been swelling; he had known it from the tenderness and uncomfortable heaviness on the right side of his face. That had subsided, and to his own eyes, he almost looked himself.

To his own eye. There was an ugly red hole in his face where his right eye had been, but even that looked much less terrible than it had felt -- red and angry, but no longer raw and



bleeding, and the lid had tucked itself quite neatly around the bony curve of the occipital orbit's open base. In a way, it looked almost tidy, almost innocuous.

Avon reached for the cleansing fluid and cupped the low-pressure washing jet against the tender place without a second thought now that he was comfortable with the idea of how it looked. He didn't miss Sibbet's nursing, not now. It was probably a good thing she'd been there; she had unquestionably hurried the course of healing. But he much preferred to do for himself, especially if the chore were distasteful.

The socket was scarring nicely. He felt pressure, but no particular pain worth noting. It was as simple a matter as any other point of personal hygiene, once one was accustomed to it. He dried his face carefully, and blotted out the empty place with a bit of cotton before he filled it with the sterile wad and tied his head back up again.

He really didn't need the band to hold the compress in place any longer. The wound was small enough that there was no danger of the cotton falling away or being caught on something; it fit completely into the socket. But it would be a shock to Sibbet when she woke, and surely she deserved some consideration for her efforts on his behalf, even while he felt it time to decline any more of the same.

When he finished his small personal chore, he found he was hungry; he'd not eaten, that he could remember, not for a little while. But it would have to wait. Sibbet had reminded him...

Thinking about her while he washed his face had reminded him. He wanted to get some information from Orac. Surely they were close to his goal now, and there was much to check up on. Instead of trying to find the galley area on the yacht, he went back to the flight deck, where Sibbet -- still snoring -- lay in one of the flight couches.

He had to smile at the picture she made, so helpless and so clearly deeply asleep. It was a notable contrast to the ever-cool technician she had been when he met her, with never a keystroke, never a subassembly performance gauge out of order. Clearly, she was exhausted, and he could well imagine she might be from what little he could remember in detail of what had happened in the last few days.

It would be a pity to wake her, but he did not feel he could risk removing Orac from the flight deck to interrogate it safely out of earshot, not lacking a pilot as he was.

Avon stood for a moment at the pilot's station, resting open hands atop Orac's casing, musing on that thought. Tarrant had been a good pilot, and comic relief besides...

No, Tarrant had just been young. But he would never be any older than when he'd forgotten everything Avon had ever tried to teach him about self-interest and knowing when to cut his losses and run. If not for Tarrant's relative youth, Avon could blame the now-dead thorn in the side of SCORPIO's crew for the fact that his stubborn streak of imperfectly suppressed idealism had cost him his life -- in a last-minute attempt to return to salvage Avon's. Cost Tarrant his life, cost Avon a good and gallant pilot...

But Tarrant was beyond Avon's frustration forever now, and pilots could be replaced, after all.

Perhaps if Sibbet were tired enough, she would not wake.



Avon tapped a finger against Orac's key, a gesture not so much to get the computer's attention as to signal the ghosts on the flight deck -- the audience to which he had been accustomed these four years past -- that he was about to ask some significant question. It was not easy to think of them as dead, not when he knew they had tried to take care of him, not when they had died for such a trivial reason. But he would get used to it; he was certain of that.

"Orac. What is the present status of our course?"

He wasn't certain how long they'd been en route. Behind him, he heard Sibbet's snoring stop abruptly, but decided against turning around, decided against facing her.

"We are scheduled to begin our descent through the atmosphere seven hours from now. I must insist I not be interrupted. Calculation of an entrance trajectory to avoid intercepting the mines in random orbit will require my full attention."

That was right; Blake had said something about it. Something had been coded with the message Blake had gotten from his clone shortly after they left here before. Avon had certainly not anticipated trying to return. But Servalan had not yet grasped the extent of Orac's capabilities if she expected her randomly orbiting minefield to succeed in denying the planet -- and Imipak -- to Roj Blake.

On the other hand, Blake had decided Imipak was a weapon best left alone, and therefore had not returned. So it had the same effect, didn't it? What did Servalan really care if the weapon was unavailable because Blake couldn't get at it, or because Blake didn't want to get at it?

"Take all the time you need, Orac. I'm not in any particular hurry. But answer my questions. How are things with Servalan these days?"

Sibbet was awake, perhaps sitting up. Avon imagined he felt her gaze as a warm itch between his shoulder-blades, as if she were staring at him. But he still wouldn't turn around. She could stare all she liked, and ask questions later. He was too interested in what the computer had to say to stop and say good-morning to her.

"The records we isolated and down-loaded into Justice System computer systems have been quite damaging. Public opinion demands her immediate execution, and she is now under maximum security at the Gallows Federation Regional Detention Centre. Her organisation has, of course, been purged..."

"Again," Avon noted to himself. It appealed to his sense of humour, as well as to his sense of propriety, to know that everywhere she went, the people foolish enough or blind enough to do her dirty work paid the predictable penalty, time and time again.

"...and her personal resources annexed to the Federation to pay for the trial and the gathering of evidence. Not to speak of the replacement cost of this yacht. You, of course, remain on the list of the Federation's twenty most wanted political criminals..."

"Oh, that is so unfair, Orac." It was funny, yes, and unfair, and there was no telling whether the computer would get the joke or not. "The least they could have done for me in return for all of that was kick me up to the top five."



His presence on a list of political criminals was agreeably ridiculous in the first place. If he didn't examine the reasoning too closely, he could enjoy looking upon that unenviable position as a present, of sorts, from Roj Blake before he died. While he'd still been capable of detached, ironic humour. Two years ago, perhaps.

"The concept of relative equity does not obtain." Well, he could have told Orac that, had Orac not beaten him to it. "High-level enforcement instruction is to make your execution a priority. Discovery of your body has been logged and confirmed at three sites so far."

Oh, better and better! He had best try to restrain his urge to gossip, Avon told himself. It would never do to become involved in his own notoriety, no matter how beguiling the concepts presented. "It's good to know I'm so popular. Did you assess our ability to make the journey?"

Behind him, he could hear the subtle shifting of fabric against fabric, informing him of Sibbet's changed position as she sat up and took notice. Perhaps literally. He could explain it later, if she asked. Then again, inside of Orac's seven hours, she would be able to see for herself. Perhaps there was no need to engage in the tedious activity of answering her questions.

"Ship's stores are adequate. Furthermore, Technician Sibbet brought along supplies which should prove highly useful."

What was this? A tone of voice... He had known Orac for too long not to catch an alteration in the tone of its voice. Orac had some cause to resent Sibbet -- as far as Orac was concerned, at least. Most interesting. What had she said to offend him? "Describe my estimated range upon leaving this ship."

"Alone, your range will logically be two weeks. If Technician Sibbet accompanies you, this is extended to a five-week period due to the improved carry factor and greater chances for living off the land. I will, of course, remain on board."

"Of course." Without the key, it went without saying, to obviate the off chance the computer might decide it could do better alone and make an unobtrusive exit -- in the yacht. He had not anticipated Sibbet being with him, but perhaps it was better that way. And if she were where he could watch her every step, he would be able to tell with greater accuracy whether or not she was working for Servalan. Her ability to report back to her possible contacts would be greatly restricted, at the very least. "And what about my clothes?"

He had no reason to mistrust Sibbet. He had worked with her once, and she had certainly done her best by him these last few days in transit, nursing him in his fever, tending his wound. On the other hand, he did not believe her tenderness and evident concern gave him any particular reason to trust her, either, since there were so many alternative explanations for conduct -- and most of them made much more sense to him than that she remembered him and had come to him out of pure nostalgic respect for a former co-worker from a more innocent time.

For that reason, the information grid was even more important to him now than it had been once Cally died.

"There is a unit in ship's stores, and a suitable carrier. You will have to install it yourself, however. This model is somewhat more primitive than the one to which you were accustomed..."



"As was the one to which I was accustomed, before I modified it. Thank you, Orac."

That was all he needed for now. And if he were to get an information grid installed in seven hours, he had to get on it right away. There wasn't any time to waste on pleasantries with Sibbet, who was sitting up and staring at him with confused, half-asleep eyes. Avon nodded to her on his way out of the room; he could explain it all later, if he decided she could be trusted with the information.

Nobody else had ever known about the information grid. Nobody. Perhaps Vila had guessed, perhaps Soolin had suspected. But they were dead now, and therefore of no particular concern.

A quick stop for a hasty meal, then to work...

\* \* \* \* \*

All right, so he didn't have to talk to her. Janel glared at Avon's back, watching him work at the navigation station on some obscure concern of his own, mindful of the necessity of finishing her part of the assignment in good time. On the one hand, there was clearly no danger of brain fever; Avon had recovered from both the traumatic shock and his body's outraged reaction alike. On the other hand, she was no longer quite as willing to be ignored as she had once been. Therefore, now that she had more confidence in her competence, now that she could grasp more clearly the value of the technical support she had to offer, Avon's apparent lack of appreciation for those resources did not settle well with her.

Six days of burdensome nursing, constantly required to handle his terrible wound, and at the end, he took her presence here for granted?

She could understand his reticence, based on a natural reluctance to refer to his own helplessness now that he could handle his difficulty himself. But it would have been civil of him to at least talk to her, conversational talk, instead of only business.

No, she hadn't asked to come, she had not offered her assistance and had her offer accepted. And no, he had never been a man to gossip, not that she had ever noticed; she had, in fact, always valued his practice of restricting himself to professional chat -- before. For years, she had remembered precisely that noncommunicative reserve, measuring other supervisors against the mark he had made -- and judging them lacking when they forgot themselves so far as to compliment her on some personal detail or to try drawing her out about her health when she'd not been sleeping well.

So, in a way, this was a fit discipline for her, to have him back again exactly the way he had been, and realize now how she had idealized and re-interpreted his self-absorbed behaviour in her mind. It was not Avon's fault. It did no good to glare at his back, to stare daggers at his shoulder-blades, to raise her eyebrow at his silent shoulders covered with their extravagance of studs.

It did no good.

But it was satisfying.

"First atmosphere in five minutes," Orac said. Warned. It was almost impossible not to credit the machine with the personality it claimed to be. "You had best be ready for possible



Impact by that time. Stand by. I will operate the course correction systems."

Who did he think he was, after all, standing at the monitors wearing studs and black leather, leaning slightly forward in concentration -- as if he had not been, mere days past, a whimpering wreck, retching helplessly into a sterile basin, sick with the horror of what he had done to himself to escape? Who did he think he was, to play the master, as if he had never lost control of the situation, as if he had never known what it felt like to lie on his back with a knife at his throat? She knew better, she had seen the prisoner transfer.

Who did he think he was trying to fool? Not her, surely. Himself, perhaps?

"We'd better strap ourselves in," he said, clearly to her, but without looking back. "I'm not quite as sure of Orac's infallibility as Orac seems to be. If there's any mistake, we could get rattled around a bit. Are you finished?"

There was little sense wasting her energy cursing at him in her mind, not when it was her own decision to be here. And she couldn't hold onto resentful feelings for long, not in his presence; there was something about the electrical charge of his neurons -- or the metabolic pheromones in his sweat -- that seemed to draw away even her most well-rationalized resentments. "Finished. What happens next?"

Finally turning from the pilot's station, Avon looked at her more directly than she could remember him having done thus far. "The last time we...I was here, the Federation seeded the atmosphere with mines, too small to be detected by conventional means. If we intercept one, we'll have a chance to see what state-of-the-art shielding means to the Supreme Commander."

There was no reason for him to look at her that way... She couldn't gauge his expression; he looked mildly amused, and even appreciative. She was almost uncomfortable, and seized upon the name he'd used once before to rescue her from confusion as he came to strap himself down on the flight couch adjacent to hers.

"Supreme Commander, you said." She could hear the subtle differentials as the power train adjusted to the changed requirements of fighting through an atmosphere. "And at the first, you told me to call Commissioner Sleer 'Servalan.'"

He didn't need an explicit question. "One and the same woman, Sibbet," he said. "But you knew that already. Didn't you?"

Why should she? "All reports indicated Servalan was gone missing, after some project or other went awry. Beyond my classification level, but involving enough money to cause a major scandal, and her not there to put the fire out..."

She knew she wouldn't feel the gravitational pull as the craft decelerated. She had to keep reminding herself of that. She had never gotten over expecting to feel the power when a shuttle or yacht like this landed, even though it would only ever happen on older, less well-maintained craft.

"All reports were, unfortunately, carefully manicured by the woman herself." The station he had chosen to monitor was to her right; as he leaned his head back against the padded neck-roll, she could see only his profile. "It's an open secret. At least, now that Orac has made some file transfers, it is. And should be a secret for only a short while longer..."



The shriek of a klaxon interrupted him, as the craft shook violently with the impact of an explosion. The cabin filled with dust and smoke and haze, the fire suppression systems adding to the confusion and the poor visibility.

Oxygen. She had to get to the oxygen. The fire suppression systems would remove all breathable air and replace it with an inert gas -- the equivalent of suffocation. It worked very well on fires.

It also worked on humans. She had to get the oxygen, but the shock of impact had rattled her too badly; she delayed too long, and was going to pass out. Avon wouldn't know where the oxygen was on this yacht, and she couldn't go for him...

She thought she heard Orac's voice, vague and indistinct, above the noise of the alarm. She thought she heard Orac complaining to himself. "This is unacceptable. Reaction time must be improved. Stand by. Additional impact possible within two minutes..."

Then darkness loomed up in front of her, and she knew she was losing consciousness. The shadow moved so slowly...

Why did it seem familiar? There was no abstract reason for the darkness to have Avon's shape, for unconsciousness to wear Avon's jacket with those rows of glittering metallic bosses -- across his shoulders, down his back, trailing across his breast like the insolent hand of an amorous wife...

The darkness reached out to her, and pressed some cold object against her face.

Then she understood.

The oxygen began to clear her fogged mind, and she realized it was not the personification of darkness in Avon's shape that she had seen. It was nothing more complex than Avon himself. With an oxygen kit.

She lay in the flight couch and rode the yacht down through the atmosphere, and resolved not to let her imagination run away with her like that again.

There were no more such sudden shocks, but trying to see what was going on was impossible. Whatever monitors she could ordinarily read from her flight couch were obscured by clouds of thick white vapour as fire suppression continued in effect. She could only guess at the damage reports. The sound of the drives was louder than it had been even at take-off, as the yacht performed a demanding series of manoeuvres; she couldn't hear a thing above the noise.

She endured the long ride down as patiently as she could, wondering how Avon had gotten up and to the oxygen so quickly. There was most probably no particular reason, but it gave her something to think about, to take her mind off the present circumstances. It apparently hadn't occurred to Avon to pre-board the life-capsules. Perhaps he knew something she didn't...

Obvious, of course. He knew a great deal she didn't know, because he had decided to come to this place about which she knew nothing.

At length, the ship broke its descent, set down, and slid to rest. Somewhere. They had arrived safely, survived the minefield passage. Now, all there was to do was find out what



sort of place "here" was.

Silence fell on the flight deck, all systems muted by the diversion of power to repair circuits. In the stillness, Janel heard Orac still muttering, little snatches of "Fascinating!" and "Most unusual!" punctuating the greater silence of the yacht. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Avon set aside his oxygen -- cautiously, at first -- and sit up, swinging his legs to the floor, turning his back to her. From all she'd heard of his discussions with Orac, if she didn't hurry, he was likely to simply pack up and leave. The computer had said she would improve his chances of survival. He wouldn't forget that, would he?

Better not to take any chances. Freeing herself from the secure webbing of the flight couch, she ran a few paces to catch up with Avon at the adit to the flight deck, noting how he turned or seemed to flinch in a subtle way that guaranteed she could have no choice but to come up on his left side.

"Let's have a look," she said. "Before we set off on this walk. Shouldn't we?"

He had on the same face she had just recently found so difficult to interpret. He seemed to raise his eyebrows without raising his eyebrows, giving his face a clear look of candid discovery and mild pleasure. "If you like."

And she could tell from his response that, no, it hadn't occurred to him to step outside the ship before he was ready to set off in earnest. He had probably felt he had all the information he could need from Orac, and he could very well be right. The fact remained that the computer was busy, and she had not had the benefit of consultation, and if she was to make an expedition into unknown territory, she wanted to have at least some idea about what it was she faced.

The outer entry lock on one side of the craft refused to function, a fact explained well enough when they climbed out the alternate exit and into the weather. The yacht had come to rest alongside a grass-covered dune or hillock on a sandy plain. One side of the yacht had plowed into the hill -- and secured the primary lock. They could reach the ground easily enough from the one available exit, but things did not look encouraging when they got there.

Janel stood silently, the welcome sensation of good earth beneath her feet, taking it all in while Avon examined the half-buried side of the yacht. It was cold; and it was raining; and a thin, unfriendly, piercing wind blew across the plain into the trees. The light was long and low-spectrum, something her mind interpreted as meaning autumn at the end of the day; and the place where they had made their landing lay in a transition zone between a forest to their left -- massed trees whose tall, thick branches were so disturbed by the wind -- and a grassland to her right -- a flat, broad plain with little dunes and scarce trees.

It would not be too difficult to make one's way across the plain; one could use a star chart for direction, and visibility was good.

It was therefore almost necessary that Avon would want to go in the other direction, into the woods, into the trees.

"The whole side of the craft's involved," he called to her over the sound of the wind. It had to be a trick of the weather; he sounded cheerful. "From the looks of these creepers, the ship will be camouflaged quite effectively within a short period of time. I could hardly have planned it any better myself."



Dusting off his hands, making for the airlock once more, he moved and sounded as she remembered him, with no hint of his recent crippling. "Creepers" obviously referred to fast-growing vegetation, but there was no reason for that to even be an issue, unless he expected to be followed. Did he simply need to be concealed from force of habit? Had it become his second nature, to cover his tracks even when there was no one to follow him?

"We'll have to be sure all the maintenance accesses in the hull are sealed." Creepers might provide excellent concealment, true. But it wouldn't be much help to be safely hidden if their fuel was contaminated by vegetable matter. "Are you ready to tell me where we're going, sir?"

Halfway through the entry lock, he paused, and smiled at her. There was no mistake about it; it was a smile, with bared teeth and drawn-up lips and all that went into the difference between a smile and a grimace. "I'm sorry," Avon said. "I can't. You see, I don't know where we're going. Not yet. Not exactly, anyway. Coming? I imagine we'll both have our fill of rain and wind very shortly. I can see no reason to deny myself warm shelter while it's still available."

Yes, he was going into the woods. Because that was the least appealing prospect of the several unappealing prospects before them. "Whatever you say, Avon. Sir."

Sooner or later, she promised herself, she would find out where they were going, and why.

Right now, the important issue was going to be how to stay warm -- and as dry as possible -- on their way there.

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They did not get far on the first day, but Avon had not expected to. It was not a question of moving more quickly by himself; Sibbet was not any less conditioned for this work than he was. But he knew she was as weary as he when night fell and they made camp on the edge of the forest. Orac had provided the azimuth and the estimate of the situation; ten days' walk, fifteen on the outside, would bring them to the site where Coser had given Imipak to Servalan -- nearly three years ago. There was no guarantee the woman and Blake's genetic approximation were still there, but it made as good a starting point as any, and Avon was in no particular hurry. He wasn't leaving until he got what he'd come for. So there was no point in wondering how long it would take.

On the second day, they walked into the forest, denser by the mile and darker as they went. The walking was not so bad, especially once the first hour or two warmed them up after the night's stiffening and cold. The dense foliage of the forest giants formed such a thick canopy overhead that little light filtered through to nourish underbrush; deadfall and needles and fungus, the debris of the forest, formed their road. The mosses seemed to do without much light, satisfied with the moisture that dripped down the tree trunks from the clouds.

It was obvious whenever they came to a break in the tree-cover. A sizeable patch of vegetation marked the place, and when one neared, one could see the sky. Such as it was.

By the end of the second day, they had heard enough of the little rustling sounds, the moderated chatter upon the branched heights, to know they were not alone in the dark twilight of this sheltered world. Orac had promised small game appropriate for food if their rations gave



out, and adequate sources of fresh, potable water. There was no reason to wait until they needed food to test the best strategies for collecting it.

On the evening of the third day, Avon walked ahead of camp, before the light failed, and set a trap, leaving it to sit out overnight and see what might be there. He did not even question that Sibbet would turn off the security dome-field they carried long enough for him to rejoin her by the fire. The idea that there might be an issue involved in whether or not she could be trusted to let him back in did not occur to him until he was sitting by the fire again; and when he realized it, the fact disturbed him a little. There was no reason he should anticipate she would be glad to see him back. She had the supplies, the food, the extra clothing, all piled with her; she could sit inside the dome-field and stare at him until he starved to death or died of exposure -- either of which could easily happen before the power-source for the portable security dome-field gave out.

The incident proved to him that he trusted Sibbet, on some primitive and subconscious level. As he had trusted Vila Restal.

That could be dangerous. She could well be in Servalan's employ. But he just did not seem able to convince himself she actually was a danger to him, at least in the sense of holding any hidden agenda. He made up his mind to watch and wait, and to monitor his own mind while he was at it; it was unnerving to realize he had not taken the possibility of betrayal into account.

On the morning of the fourth day, there was a creature in the trap, a rodent of some sort, but of a size to feed a man to satiety. The smell of its roasted flesh was not particularly appetizing, but the meat itself was unobjectionable, and Orac had described the creature well enough for Avon to feel confident there was no danger to his health if he consumed it.

Sibbet did not share his confidence; she refused a portion and simply watched -- looking a trifle nauseated -- as he ate what was left. It made no sense to waste food. If they ran out, he was confident she would find herself able to eat roast rodent soon enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was early afternoon on the fifth day they had been walking. The sound and smell of water had been in the air for the last few miles; a river cut their line of advance, and when they came to its banks, Avon squatted down on his heels to consider how best to get across. Sibbet dropped her pack beside his and scrambled down the shallow, rocky bank to sit upon a boulder that intruded farther into the stream.

He didn't quite know what she thought she was doing, but as long as she seemed content to crouch down on the rocks -- as opposed to trying an unexamined crossing -- he was content to leave her with her thoughts as she left him alone with his. The current looked deep and strong, judging from the lack of brackish water and aquatic plants. No telling how far it ran up -- or down -- stream before a more narrow crossing might present itself, and visibility was poor. Of course, they'd make better time following the river, but it would be in the wrong direction, at right angles to the way he wished to go.

Avon glanced up at the sky, bright with sunlight diffused through the clouds. It looked as if there was rain upriver. It would be best to be clear of the banks in case of flash floods. He looked down to warn Sibbet away from whatever occupied her attention in the water.



She leaned close over the surface, her arm reaching into the current as if feeling the bottom. Well, there was no danger for the next few moments, surely. Now, were they to try crossing today, and hope to be dry by nightfall...?

Sudden movement caught his eye, a dark object against the background of clouds. Alarmed, Avon stood quickly, scanning the sky. What was it? A flyer? Surely no one else had done what Orac had only barely managed, gotten through the protective minefield in orbit. A flyer left on planet, then, something Blake's pseudo-clone had found and repaired and was using as a scout?

There it was again, skimming at tree-top level, altering its course and speed with minute adjustments of the angle of its wings and tail. It was a bird, only that. No more than a bird, a raven or a rook or a crow, the first such living thing he had seen since his arrival, apart from the rodent he had trapped.

Why did it startle him so badly, a mere bird? Perhaps it had come from the right side; perhaps that was what surprised him. He was adjusting to the fact that he saw the world out of one side of his face. He could judge depth and distance to his satisfaction, from the remembered relationship clues of a lifetime of fully sighted navigation. But he still found himself surprised when he didn't see things to his right although he knew perfectly well they were there.

The bird flew down the river-course, sinking in altitude, passing beyond his vision as it followed the bend of the river. Moments later, it came back from the direction into which it had just disappeared, slowing perceptibly.

It was going to land, Avon realized. It was going to light quite near to him. He kept still. Janel, down on the river, did not move, and would not alarm the bird; there was no need to warn her off. Avon was curious about it.

The bird came in across the river in long, slow curves; its final pass brought it to earth upon a rocky ledge not ten metres removed. A black creature, not like a hawk, with a pointed bill that lacked the raptor's hook; quite large, really, perhaps as tall as half a metre, if his judgement was not totally awry. Avon sat down again, taking care to keep his movements slow and smooth. The bird did not move until he was still; then it started to edge forward. So it was as curious about him as he was about it. What could it be?

Closer. Quite close. The bird appeared to stare at his shoulders. Now that it was almost close enough to touch, Avon realized -- quite suddenly -- that it was a little frightening in its size, the heavy gloss of its brilliant black plumage, the heavy power of its beak. He would call it a rook, he decided. Doubtless it was not a rook. Doubtless Orac had a careful and correct classification based on taxonomic principles that would place it among this class or that class of terraform avians -- but Orac was days behind him, and wouldn't be doing any classification without his key anyway.

A rook. Almost close enough to touch...

And the bird lunged, swift and silent, pecking at his shoulder with a lightning strike of speed that surely would have meant an injury -- at least to Avon's clothing -- had the movement not startled him off balance.

He went over onto his left side, and scrambled to right himself, momentarily panicked beyond







reason by the fact that his blind side was uppermost. Then, when he found his balance, when he regained his equilibrium, he found Janel to one side of him, the bird to the other, both with their heads cocked quizzically to one side. They looked so much alike, for just that instant, that Avon wanted to laugh -- a welcome temptation; he hadn't wanted to laugh for quite some time. But she'd worry about hysteria. Perhaps it would be better to ask about the fish instead...

"How did you manage that?"

She'd clearly been distracted from her triumph, and only regained her flush of pride when she looked down at the large fish she carried by its gills. "Fish tickling. I've always heard about it, but never had a chance to try it before. These fish must be naive -- it worked. Isn't he lovely? We'll have him for supper. What about the bird? Can we manage two courses?"

No, he didn't feel a particular need to capture the bird for future consumption, although Janel might possibly wish to consider the wisdom of waving such a tempting morsel underneath the beak of a curious rook. "I think it's attracted to bright, shining objects. Like the ones I'm wearing. I hate to disappoint it. Maybe it will settle for fish bones."

The dark clouds he'd seen upriver were closer; they wouldn't get across today. "We'd better get back into the woods; there's rain upriver, could be a flood." It would also be nice to get the dome up while the ground beneath was still relatively dry. "Watch that this beast doesn't try for your dinner, Janel."

She looked down at the fish, and he thought she blushed. He realized, belatedly, that he had used her first name. "Not a chance. Sir. Let's get under cover, then."

She started past him, not looking at him, and Avon moved to travel between her and the bird, just in case. The rook took a few hops after them, bobbing ridiculously and clumsily up the stony shore; then, suddenly, as if fed up with such an inferior mode of locomotion, it took to wing and vanished into the woods ahead of them.

Determined, Avon thought. Where did it go? To lay an ambush? It was nowhere in sight -- but as he grew accustomed once more to the more diffuse light under the trees, he realized it was staying with them. Hopping, flying ahead, waiting, it was there, an ominous shadow among the greater mass of shadows, talking to itself as it went in a series of short, unmelodic bursts of raucous comment on whatever subject it might be that captured the attention of a bird. Studs. Fishes. Branches out of sequence. In silent understanding of the shared situation, they both sought the high ground, and the security dome-field was up scant moments before the rain began to fall -- or moments before it filtered through the branches.

It was a heavy rain, brutal and punishing, beating down the fungus and the few ferns on the forest floor. At the last possible moment before the dome-field energized, the rook waddled across the perimeter and into the safe, protected circle with them.

Avon looked at Sibbet; she at him. Shutting down the field to throw the bird out would mean getting wet; the rain was heavy, and the only real protection they had was the security dome-field that kept creatures and debris and water out while permitting the free transfer of gases. Avon felt he could abide the company of a bird, as long as it did not attack him; an uninvited guest was preferable to a gratuitous soaking, after all. The bird would doubtless wander out of the dome-field in time and be unable to get back in, and that would be that.



Sibbet just shrugged, and went to strike flame to the pile of dry wood they'd been lucky enough to collect before the weather arrived.

They could deal with the damp, of course; they did have cold-weather and wet-weather gear on the anti-grav sledge that followed them so obediently. Perhaps the anti-grav sledge would carry their goods dry across the water, come to that, but Avon had let his mind wander away from the point -- which was that dry ground and a fire were much to be preferred to damp ground and no fire. They could be faced with damp ground and no dry fire-wood soon enough -- tomorrow, if the rain were more than strictly localized.

With all these considerations in mind, the warmth and the scent of the fish baking between two green twigs were more welcome than he had ever imagined such simple comforts could be. He slapped the rook's head away from his shoulder without much thinking about it.

They would lose half a day's travel time, yes, and surely, if it was raining, the river would be even more difficult to cross than it might have been before. They'd have to deviate from their course to get across, so the question became one of the lesser of two evils. Upstream? Downstream? Which would be less of a diversion?

The bird had hopped around behind his back; Avon could almost feel its black, lidless stare intent on the sensor-studs that crossed the back of his shoulders. Picking up a pebble, he tossed it up and over his head; and the bird apparently realized sneaking up on him wouldn't work.

Avon was beginning to rather enjoy the bird, with its evident and single-minded passion for his sensor-studs. It was a classic, hopeless passion, a case of pure desire for an unobtainable object. If this went on much longer, he would feed it some fish, to make up for the disappointment he felt it must be suffering.

The rain came down steadily and strong; he could see little rivulets dripping down the trunk of the nearest tree. The lowlands could be fairly soggy; perhaps they would be best off on the riverbank after all, as long as the river didn't get too high.

Sibbet cut the fins and tail off the fish and passed them to him on a bit of leaf; then the head. At least she'd gotten it gutted before they'd shut themselves in, and spared herself the difficulty of shoving a pile of raw fish entrails through the dome-field with no water to wash her hands with afterwards.

The rook circled around in front of him, its wings lifted slightly, hunching itself forward. Avon fed it fins and tail, but decided in favour of letting it go off by itself with the fish-head. It wasn't prudent of him to feed it from his hand; he had bruised fingers to show for it.

The bird carried the fish-head off and through the security dome-field, looking quite startled when it found itself rained upon so unexpectedly. There was no help for it; raising the dome-field to let it back in was out of the question.

Sibbet passed a piece of fish across to Avon, a piece of fillet, cooked and steaming, and he picked at it with his fingers until it was cool enough to handle. He had to watch his tendency to anthropomorphize, he told himself. At any moment, he was going to start calling the rook Vila, for its solemn clownishness. Vila, or Bird, or Fishbreath, and he was clearly being silly now. He was lucky Sibbet wasn't listening in on his train of thought.



"Compliments to the chef," he said. "You're right, fish is better than rodent. Perhaps you'll be able to collect another tomorrow."

"We try to find a ford to cross?" She sat opposite him, her feet pulled up and her knees splayed out comfortably. "I haven't the first idea how to go about making a river crossing. Wasn't covered in any of my cybernetics classes."

True enough. "Nor in any of mine. We shall simply have to improvise. We stand the best chance upriver, I think."

"Try to find a tree close enough to the river and fell it, I suppose. One of those with the really solid trunks. Triangulate for an adequate length. Once the river is narrower."

She sounded tired, even though it was early yet. But they had been working hard these past few days, and perhaps it wasn't a bad idea to get a few extra hours of rest. She nodded past him, behind his back, a chunk of steaming fish-meat in one hand. "Looks like your friend is back."

His friend? Avon followed the direction of her gesture.

The bird. The rook was hopping around the perimeter of the dome-field, testing it from time to time with wings and beak. Wouldn't give up, would it? Just as well it was outside; otherwise, he'd not be able to sleep in peace for fear of a midnight bandit disassembling his sensor grid because of its receptors.

"He won't dissolve. In the rain." Avon settled his shoulders against his pack, using it for a pillow. "I don't doubt he'll be gone to drier pastures before morning."

Now that he stopped to consider it, a few extra hours of sleep was not a bad idea at all. The sound of the rain was soothing, set against the comforting foreground of the guardian fire. A few hours' rest, and they'd be that much more ready to face the journey in the morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

But the bird was not gone in the morning, or not gone far. It made its breakfast on fish entrails -- to judge from the suspicion of scales slinging to its feet -- and was there, flying low over the river, as they started out to follow the high ridge of the river's cut northward. The water had indeed risen, as Avon had anticipated, but the levels were not yet threatening, while the inland forest floor was soggy and marshy enough to make the rocky shoreline a pleasant change.

Still after his studs, Avon decided. Either that, or it was suspiciously well socialized, and he didn't understand why that could be. In any event, as long as the bird stayed with them, it was not going to carry any indirect information about gutted fish to its hypothetical trainer, so he fed it scraps and let it hop around beside him when they stopped for meals, tossing bits of wood or pebbles at it whenever it approached his studs with an overly acquisitive expression in its eyes.

It was actually useful to have around, as Avon discovered after a short time. The sensor grid only functioned over limited distance; for the longer range, the bird itself alerted him, travelling at his right, flapping or croaking, cawing or starting when it thought it saw



something out of the ordinary. He could not abide Sibbet on his right -- not that he did not trust her, not specifically, but because she made him nervous, no matter if he rather suspected she would do him no harm.

The bird had no human subtleties to trouble him, no human ambiguities to take into account. It operated on pure instinct, an idealized desire for his studs -- or for any other shiny object that might catch its eye. Apart from dunking itself in the river once or twice in search of a deceptively near pebble that happened to catch the light, the bird was probably adequately well prepared to look after itself, and come to that -- or come to the river -- it seemed to feel no embarrassment, seemed to come to no hurt from the water.

On the third day of walking upriver, they found a narrow shoal where the current ran furious and strong, but shallow enough in most places to be waded through, and narrow enough to be successfully forded. The supply sledge almost tipped, and they had to spend half a day drying the dampened cargo on the riverbank in the pale, cold sun. But they were across, and as soon as dawn broke on the next day, they headed back downriver to where they had deviated from their course.

The forest floor had had five days to dry out, and it was only unpleasantly damp beneath the trees. The rook grew weary of following them by hopping behind and flying before, and started to perch itself with the cargo. When it grew equally bored with riding on the supply sledge, it tried for Avon's shoulder, and after three or four false starts managed to perch itself comfortably enough there -- as if, having decided the man would not permit him to steal the tokens it desired, it acquired possession of those tokens in its own mind by annexing his shoulder as its territory, and woe to the foreign rook who might attempt to usurp that sovereign position.

The conceit rather amused Avon. As long as he was to be a nest, the bird would not commit an act that would make it awkward to have around, after all, since birds did not as a rule foul their own nests. It wasn't a heavy bird, although it was big. It didn't weary him to carry it -- or at least, it didn't weary him enough for him to notice the additional weariness through the baseline fatigue of walking all day and trying to learn how to function with one eye at the same time. Bird on the right, to cover his blind spot. Sibbet on the left, and just a bit in front, because it was so much a habit for him now to not trust her that he could not feel comfortable else. The sensor grid provided information about what was behind him.

He felt relatively secure, fairly confident there would be no surprises.

But when the Roj Blake genetic construct made its appearance, it was dead in front of them, stepping out from the concealment of an immense tree trunk to take a stand in their direction of travel and remain there, silent, waiting for them.

They were two days into the forest on the other side of the river, although Avon had not really been counting them as such, not once he and Sibbet had demonstrated -- to their own satisfaction as well as to each other's -- that they were not dependent upon the rations they carried. Two days into the forest, the bird becoming comfortable and familiar on his shoulder, the problem of navigating on dim, uncertain ground becoming less a matter of constant attention and more a background irritation, Sibbet's presence always on his left where he expected her as comfortable and familiar as the bird he was really going to have to find a name for.

They walked without conversation, without stopping, the repetitive, imperative constant of



forward motion its own queer reinforcement over time. He didn't think about what he had come for, didn't think about where he was going. He existed in the moment, and was at peace because he was in motion. They'd made good time since morning; at this rate, they'd quickly recover most of the time lost when they detoured around the river at its flood.

Something up ahead agitated the bird on his shoulder. In the uncertain light, Avon squinted at the shadows, not alarmed because the bird was not alarmed, but curious all the same.

The bird had been quiet all day long, except for intervals of stalking around and muttering to itself from time to time. What was it on about? There were no particular breaks in the clouds, no sound of running water, but all the same, the bird took flight quite suddenly, and headed for a target in the trees. There was movement there, like the bending of a branch beneath the weight as the bird lit; but there were no branches, not so near the ground, and there was something about the edge of the shadow that Avon knew he recognized long instants before he understood he had recognized it, or what it was that he had recognized.

"I think there's someone up ahead, sir," Sibbet said. Quietly, so her voice would not carry, so the hissing sibilants of a whisper would not alert a stranger. It was well handled, well done, but still the silent shadow seemed to hear and to respond. It moved to the right, detaching itself from the greater mass of the tree, revealing itself as the figure of a man with a bird on his shoulder -- a figure Avon recognized.

"Blake," he said. And stopped. "I've been wondering how long it would be before we found you. What tipped you off? Oh, you don't mind my calling you Blake, I hope."

Sibbet had halted in turn, waiting rather more behind him than before. As far as Avon could remember, he'd never quite gotten around to explaining it all to her, but it was academic now.

"Why not?" the Blake construct replied, stepping forward once it was obvious he'd been recognized. "It is my name, after all. You're Avon, I imagine, is that right? You joined Blake's crew months before I was born; they briefed me very thoroughly on you especially."

An ambiguous claim at best. The girl's communication with Blake on the subject of Imipak had been rather spottily reported -- by Blake himself. Avon had pulled some of the details out of the computer systems, but there'd been a great deal left unexplained. Such as the precise degree to which the Blake construct was conditioned to obey some master plan of Servalan's, for example.

"In which case, you know nothing of importance. I've come a long way to have a talk with you, Blake. Am I going to have to disarm you first, or have you shaken off your earlier tutelage?"

Blake began to approach, placing his feet step by meditative step, as if each choice of placement was a new decision to be thoroughly pondered. "I have never forgotten my earliest tutelage, Avon, and my first teaching was in the Rule of Life. You're quite safe here -- as I consider myself to be safe with you. Is this lady among Blake's crew as well?"

First "my," then "Blake's." Avon had wondered, from time to time, what the self-definition of a clone might be, and this one offered no hints whatever. "She's with me, for the moment. And I do remember Imipak. Is the bird a pet?"

Blake was close enough now that his face was clearly visible, whole and unscarred, untroubled by the wars and his own moral dilemmas. He stood in front of Avon, offering Sibbet his hand.



"A spy, actually. They're a curious lot, but they like to be fed, so they all come home of an evening unless something unusual has caught their attention. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, lady. You can follow me back to a base camp if you like, Avon. It will be dark soon."

As if he didn't know that. "Thank you. As the social life in the forest seems a bit restricted, I imagine we will be just as well advised to do so."

The Blake construct was almost too much like Blake. Avon could hear himself talking the way he had once been accustomed to do in former times. Almost too much like Blake, but without the subtle hint of chronic anxiety, without the almost constant undernote of manipulative energy -- Blake without guilt, Blake without a mission.

And therefore, not Blake at all. There had to be a mission, or it would not be enough like Blake for him to do what he had come to do. Imipak... Perhaps Imipak was this Blake's mission...

The Blake construct nodded. Turning back the way he'd come, he gestured with his head for them to follow him, the bird now taking flight to vanish into the darkness up ahead. "Not far," the clone promised. "Warm food, and shelter. Once you've had a chance to eat and rest, you can tell me why you bothered to come back here."

Why, that was exactly the point.

Smiling grimly to himself, Avon followed Blake's genetic construct to encampment.

\* \* \* \* \*

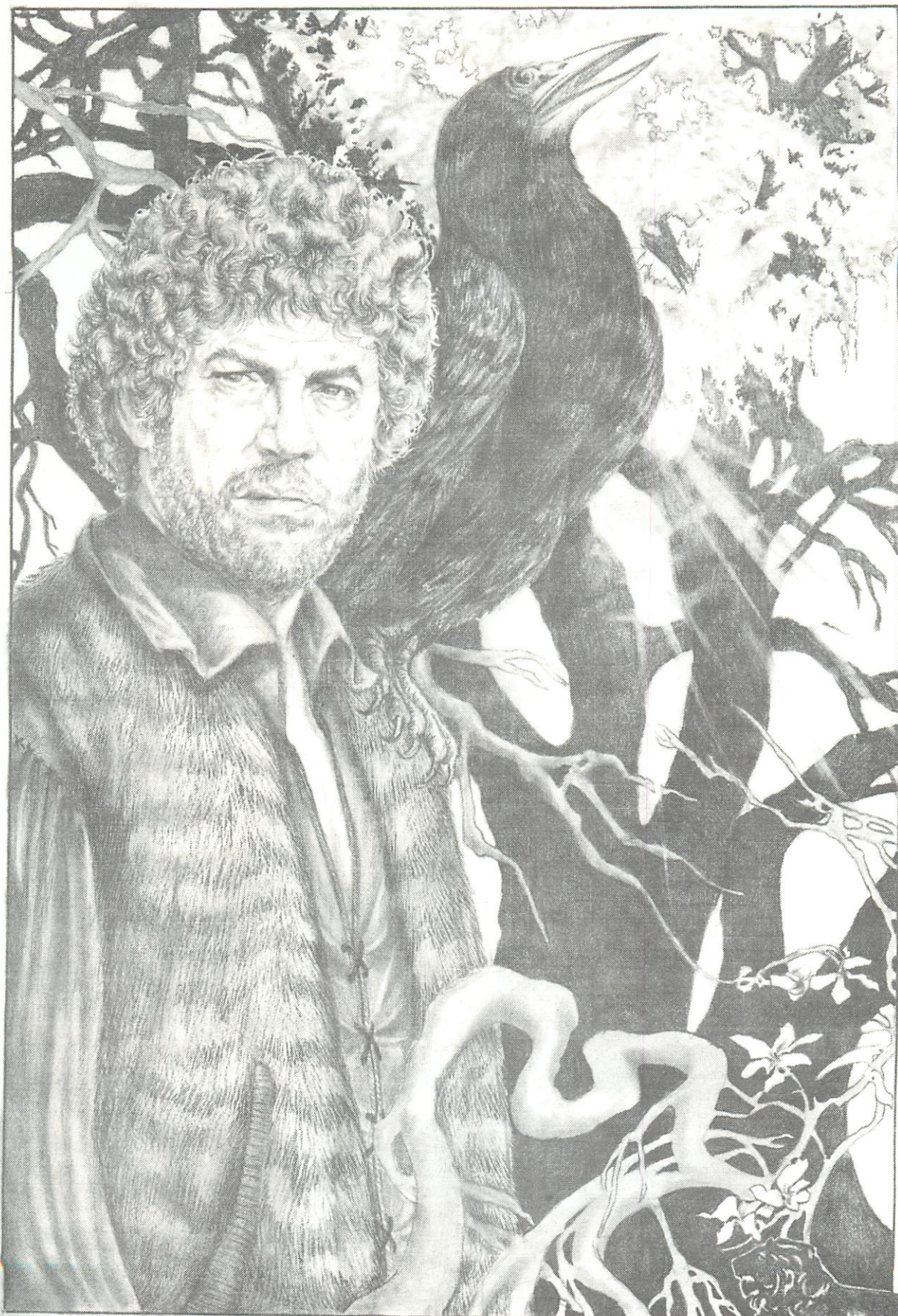
Janel had given up guessing what was expected to happen next. All she was certain of was that this man who appeared out of the forest came as no particular surprise to Avon, even if Avon had not particularly expected him just when he came. The best guess she could make was that Avon himself was uncertain about why he'd come, what he was doing here. Was the reason he'd not quite gotten around to telling her where he was going simply that he hadn't known?

She could accept that; it troubled her less than being kept out because of mistrust. And since the man who called himself by the same name as the former leader Orac claimed Avon had murdered seemed to bear them no ill will, she was content to follow him in Avon's wake. Mistrustful and cautious as Avon had become, he would surely be twice as wary of his former leader's representative, so if he was relaxed and easy, there could be no reason for apprehension, and she was all in favour of being brought to a base camp. Preferably one with a permanent structure of some kind. A hot shower and a drinktab would be lovely, but she hoped she had more sense than to count on it. Still, as long as they were going to be under cover before the rain came again, she would be content, bringing up the rear, with the auto-sledge behind her and Avon gone on before...

It was good to be behind him. One was not so constantly reminded of his wound. He'd taken to wrapping a dark bit of cloth around his head, over his eye; she guessed the cold and damp were uncomfortable to the still-healing socket. Every time she looked at him, she had to see it, her eyes drawn away from the wry inquiry of his expression to the black scar of fabric that crossed his face on the diagonal. Yes, his back was better...

It was early in the day, but since it was autumn, the light was beginning to go. A matter of





Seymour '89





perhaps three hours intervened between their guide's self-revelation and their arrival at the base camp. By the time they reached their destination, it was too dark to more than glimpse the vague outline of an undefined complex of buildings, mounding low to the ground and all but indistinguishable from the forest floor itself. Ahead of her, the figure of "Blake" -- of their guide -- was silhouetted briefly against the startling illumination of an open doorway; then the entire front of the structure was thrown into sharp relief, flattened into the illusion of two-dimensionality by bright floodlights that lined the lower eaves of their refuge as Blake turned on the lights.

Janel blinked, unpleasantly startled, disoriented by the brilliance and the suddenness of it. "Come in," Blake called to her; Avon was closer to the door, and had been within an arm's reach of Blake all this time. "There will be plenty of time to talk once you're fed and rested. You'll be perfectly safe here, I can promise you that."

As if it were an issue with her, as if she weren't only following where Avon chanced to lead. Her eyes adjusted, and she could see better; the installation was half buried in the forest floor, the lights all at eye level, and Avon stood amidst the glare and waited for her. Patiently. She could not see his face, but she could read the angle of his shoulders as well as any look by now, after all the days of wandering in the woods with nothing to divert her except Avon. She hurried forward, the sledge still following behind, to pass into the installation without further hesitation.

Primitive in some ways, the camp was nevertheless of a much more civilized order than she had seen since they left the yacht. Their guide brought them down a long hall and into a sparsely furnished room, no rug, no decorations, just a chair and a table and two beds, set at adjacent angles to each other. The man Avon had greeted as Blake was silent as the sledge laboured in, as Janel shut it down to rest in a corner; when he finally spoke, he seemed uncomfortable, as if uncertain about something.

"We've not got the best selection for guest accommodations, but there is another room, if one should be wanted. It is a bit further down this passageway. Shall I bring you there? Or you, lady?"

Until the end, Janel could catch no hint of which of them he was addressing, Avon or herself. Avon had his face turned away, unbuckling his outer tunic in a meditative manner. It was his blind side; she could not yet read the expression on the right side of his face, not without the eye to focus her attention.

"There's no need," he said. "We're accustomed to doing together by now, I think. We shall manage without any hazard to modesty. Thanks anyway. There is a wash-room?"

"Through that door. I'll be back in half an hour with some food. The beds should be made up already, and there are soap and towels. Anything else you need, let me know. I'll be back in a short while."

Whether or not Blake had actually been talking to her, he seemed glad enough to have Avon's reassurances. Janel decided to be offended at his blithe assumption that Avon spoke in her stead and for her interest. But it would have to wait until she was rested. And there was no sense in trying to work up a galactic-class outrage on an empty stomach, or when she'd not had hot water in which to wash for days.

Avon had already turned toward the sledge, to break open the seal and unpack a few odds and



ends. Blake let himself out, and as soon as the soft click of the door-latch sounded in the near-empty room, Avon tilted his head up and looked at her out of the corner of his eye, his expression ambiguous, unfathomable. "Well?"

It was a question comprised of many questions. What did she think of their situation? What did she think of Blake? What did she want to know? Unable to decide which question to answer first, she shrugged them all off, choosing to answer an unrelated one instead.

"Youth before beauty," she announced, and opened the door to the wash-room. He watched from the sledge in the corner as she turned to close it once again behind her; he looked amused, even moderately fond, but it was hard to tell from half his face. She thought about it as she stripped herself of layer after layer of cold-weather gear, as she stood in the gratefully soothing warmth of the wet-shower.

She'd not been alone this long since Avon came on board the yacht. First, she'd been too anxious for his welfare; then, they'd been out in the woods together. She had once heard a tiresome academic declaim on artistic theory, the idea of character analysis from the asymmetry of the face. Private faces, public faces, but Avon had only one side now, and she could not decide whether the blunt and frightening passion of the man she was coming to know was something that had been there all along, hidden by the softer balance of his blinded side -- or whether it was a change the years had brought.

Now that she had come this far, now that they had come to this place, it seemed she clearly must have been insane ever to have taken so extreme a step as to hide out on a yacht and follow Avon. But when she tried to think about what her state of mind had been, she could only remember the bit of tape she had watched, Avon at the door to the Commissioner's quarters with his head thrown back and rolling impotently on his shoulders. She could not have done anything else.

She was simply going to have to come to terms with that fact.

Once she was out of the shower, it was hard to put on the same clothes she'd worn. Maybe there would be a way to clean them before they left again -- because it was somehow certain that they would be leaving again. On board the yacht, she had access to the sterile-drawer, although the showers were all sonic cleansers, rather than honest hot water. Here? If the showers ran real liquid, would one be expected to cleanse one's clothing in liquid as well?

By the time she came out of the wash-room, Avon had spread most of his outer garments over the floor to dry and was lying on one of the beds, his hands clasped behind his head. He got up, not looking at her, not speaking, as she opened the wash-room door, and went in as she came out. She heard the sound of water running as she sat down on the edge of the other bed.

She felt awkward, in a way she hadn't felt for years, but there was no question of an awkward state of affairs -- clearly not from Avon's point of view, at least. He had told Blake she was with him, but she knew how to interpret that. "The woman," as he had described her, had no more intimate meaning in this case than "the technician" or "the pilot." It was a generic term, nothing more, and the place he had chosen to put her -- on the left, where he could look at her in bed if he liked -- was only because of the trouble he was having adjusting to the thing he had done, nothing more.

The bed was soft and clean, and the room, while bare and bright and fragrant with the smell of drying woods, was warm. She lay back on the pillow and closed her eyes.



She was asleep before she realized what was happening to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Avon finished his toilet, Sibbet was asleep and snoring quietly in her corner of the room. Just as well, he told himself. She'd only want to talk, ask him questions it would take too much time to answer. Like about Imipak, for instance.

He turned down the lights, appreciating the fact that the room was as well heated as it was, and that the door could be bolted from the inside. Not that there was any real sense in bolting it. If the Blake construct wanted to harm them, he undoubtedly could have done so before now -- in dozens of ways -- and from a comfortably safe distance. The Blake construct had been and gone; there was food on the table...

It would keep.

There was just something about a bolted room that was reassuring, that was all...

He lay down on the cot, folding his arms beneath the pillow and propping his head on them. It was easy enough. Blake had Imipak. Blake could simply mark them, then plant a trigger device; he unquestionably knew the terrain, better than Avon did. And technically speaking, it was an open question whether or not he was still vulnerable to Imipak due to the original encounter he'd had with the weapon.

Avon had thought about molecular destabilization from time to time, when he had nothing better to do. A cell destabilized at a molecular level would be recognized by the surrounding cells as genetically different and therefore dangerous -- unless the molecular marking did not affect the genetic structure. And if it did not affect the genetic structure, it was good only as long as the life of the cell. There was every reason to suspect the Imipak molecular marking did not persist past normal generational replacement of whatever cells were affected.

Therefore, the only problem remaining was that he didn't have any way to tell how deeply the trace went. If the mark penetrated deeply enough to affect the cells of the central nervous system, it would be more or less permanent -- but there was no reason to suspect it might. Coser had been a man afflicted by an impatience with good, prudent procedure that had tripped him up more than once, even before his final aberration. Avon rather suspected he'd never tested the weapon over a long period; there hadn't been enough time between its discovery or creation and Coser's desertion of ranks.

Quite apart from Imipak, he expected no danger from Blake's corner, although he maintained a baseline wariness out of habit and good prudence of his own. There was no reason for Blake to wish him harm -- not yet. Once he heard the story, it would change; until then, they were probably safe, he and Janel, as safe as either of them could expect to be anywhere.

It was an amusing thought.

He carried it with him into the land of dreams, smiling as he went.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was a man of purpose without a purpose, a clone that was not a clone, a tool that had



turned upon the very people who had given him life -- the people without whose interest he would never have existed. And in a real sense, he did not exist at all, or so he told himself throughout the long winter evenings when Rashel was asleep and the fire burned low.

What was a man without a history? No man at all. Who was a man if he was not the sum of his actions, his learning, his experiences?

He had so few experiences of his own; all the rest belonged to someone else, to the man he had been created to betray, to the man after whom he was named. He had so little in common with Roj Blake -- except, of course, that each of them had been genuinely wronged, genuinely used. Blake in his rigged trials and false testimonies. Himself in his careful moulding to be a man his teachers sought to destroy. There had been another one like him, killed even before he'd had a chance to think and grow and become fully human.

It wasn't so bad, alone, here, not so bad with Rashel for his companion. He had a responsibility of sorts, primarily to protect Rashel, and in a secondary sense to keep Imipak away from anyone who sought to use it. Rashel was good for him. She thought slowly, but she thought well, and she had a wealth of practical knowledge that left him awe-struck and humble in the face of her matter-of-fact and undemonstrative competence.

Even with her support, he knew he was half a man, an approximation of a man, an incomplete being -- and the people who had come reminded him of it, forcibly. There could be only one reason for Kerr Avon's presence here, and that was Imipak. That in turn clearly implied that, one way or another, Roj Blake had lost control of Avon as completely as the Supreme Commander had lost control of him. But the fact was secondary, in Blake's mind, to the knowledge that Avon knew Roj Blake, and he could not put aside his rankling awareness of having been created for a whim in the face of a man who had known one after whom he had been modeled.

Kerr Avon was not so successful as a man himself, perhaps. He could remember his instruction well enough, information impressed upon his mind by direct biomechanical manipulation even before he had become conscious of his own being. Avon was a failed embezzler, in support of a second-class revolutionary; a man who had a solid record, an impressive career in pure research and technical applications alike before greed betrayed him to the authorities. A petty, sordid little man, for all his intellect -- and he'd degenerated since, from the look of him.

The Avon Blake had learned from the indoctrination was a young man yet, full of spite and scorn, possessed of the pride and the confidence of his unquestionably solid and reliable competence with machines and other formal logic systems. The man Blake had just brought in from the cold was an older man, his face sunk against his skull, no trace of the smoothing, unctuous weight of a self-indulgent, well-rewarded life, a man whose one remaining eye held pain and mockery that seemed inseparably commingled, a man who moved with the relentless restlessness of someone who moved at all only because he willed it, not because he had any particular interest or pleasure in his going.

And mutilated as well; the man had lost an eye...

Avon had gone grey about the temples, with age and stress. Blake had been created nearly grey; the change in his own face was the result of the artificial level at which he had been brought to self-awareness. He envied Avon his pain, the evidence of life upon his countenance. If Avon was injured, if Avon was crippled, still Avon was more of a man than he was, whose character had been artificially induced and merely created...



"Why have they come here?"

Rashel's voice broke his black musings, and Blake called himself out of his self-pity to address the real world once more, lifting his head from his hands and taking care to clear the brooding from his face before standing up and turning around to look at her.

"To fetch back Imipak, I assume. But there's got to be something else going on. They're not with Blake any more. What have you heard? Anything?"

Rashel was different than she had been when they first met. She, too, had changed, as a real human being changes over time -- and yet, although he'd told her what he was, it never seemed to occur to her that he was not a real man, not an actual man, because of it. She called him "Roj" and "Blake" without any affectation or hesitation. With Rashel, he could forget the trouble of his spirit and be happy -- unless someone like Avon came from the outside, to remind him. Rashel had grown less slim, less delicate, as the muscle already laid over her thin frame by the slavery of her life hardened and developed in freedom. She filled his arms to perfection, with her solid and feminine strength, beautiful still while no longer pretty; she filled his arms now and gave him comfort, putting her arms around him, laying her cheek against his shirt and rocking him gently as she spoke.

"There isn't much, not on the public transmissions. A great deal of discussion about Commissioner Sleer having been accused of a great many crimes. No news about revolutionaries. We've not heard from Blake for almost a year now. I wonder if he's still alive."

"I suspect not. But perhaps Avon can tell us." It was hard to imagine there wouldn't be publicity if the man were dead. But on the other hand, there would only be publicity if he were killed in some gun-fight, some confrontation, or by the authorities in one of their thinly justified executions. He could have caught cold and died as easily as been terminated, and if he died of natural causes, the Federation might never even know their most persistent gadfly was forever past buzzing about their eyes.

"There is a woman with him?"

She sounded a bit dubious; she'd not actually seen either of their guests, not yet. He wasn't sure she actually wanted to. "He didn't mention her name. Yes. He did say she was with him, when I asked if she was among Blake's crew as well."

Rashel would know he was curious about why she'd mentioned it; he didn't need to ask. Even after more than two years of freedom, of complete sovereignty over her own life, she still spent perhaps more time than really necessary explaining herself. "Well, there's nothing about Blake, or even Avon. But there is a hunt up for a woman, a deserter, from Commissioner Sleer's unit. On Gauda Prime. Wanted for questioning in connection with the Commissioner's trial, but isn't that where we heard from him last?"

"Gauda Prime, yes." There was a hint there. Perhaps Blake was operating on Gauda Prime and had engineered the disgrace of this Commissioner. Perhaps the woman had a message for him after all.

"You'll watch out for yourself, of course," Rashel warned lovingly, pushing herself away from him. "Shall I come with you? Or would you prefer I kept an eye out on the interbase monitors?"



"Best you stay out of sight. They don't know you're here on site, and I might want the advantage of that surprise. I mean to offer them the use of the laundering room, unless that interferes."

She shook her head. "That should be no problem. Going now?"

"They've had eight hours to eat and sleep. Unless I do go, they'll be wanting to explore the base, and I'd prefer they didn't, not until we've got more information. Yes?"

"Agreed." With a sharp nod of assent, she gave her stamp of approval to his reasoning, and he kissed her forehead on his way out of the room.

He didn't look forward to talking to Avon. He rather anticipated an unpleasant scene, especially when Avon realized he was not going to release Imipak.

But he felt better, after talking to Rashel. He always felt better after talking to Rashel. He supposed that was one of the things love was all about.

\* \* \* \* \*

Until now, Avon had declined the Blake construct's frequent invitations to talk. There was no sense in sitting down and having a discussion about things until he was ready -- and he didn't feel he was ready as long as the business of cleaning and mending and replenishing supplies from Blake's apparently bountiful stores was still in progress. Once he did sit down to talk to Blake, there was no telling how quickly he would need to leave.

But now it was safe. The sledge was packed, and he and Sibbet were rested once again, and the pain in his eye-socket was so minor and constant that he almost didn't notice it any more.

Habituated. He'd become habituated to the pain in his eye, as he'd become habituated to the pain in his heart when Cally died. It didn't take as long as it had with Cally, and for that, Avon was grateful. Winter would begin in earnest soon, and it was time to say what he had come to say and get out while there was still good reason to expect they'd not get caught in unmanageable weather on their way back to the ship. He was clear in his mind about that, if not exactly clear about what it was he'd come this far to do.

"So. Avon." For days, Blake had been after him to talk. He had brought chairs and a bottle, two glasses, a plate of food for two or three, in case Sibbet should want to sit in.

Sibbet apparently was not interested. She was lying on her side on the bed, her back turned to them, ignoring Blake's invitation rather than declining it.

Blake had made all his preparations. But now that he was finally to get what he had insisted he wanted, he seemed as much at a loss as Avon himself about how to open the long-awaited conversation.

Perhaps it would be best to simply restate what amounted to the ground rules, the concepts they could both agree on. "You've asked me why we came here. And I imagine you're interested in what's been happening out there. I can't tell you everything because I don't know everything. But I can tell you what I know."



Blake looked a little suspicious; Avon could tell it from his eyebrows, and it made him uncomfortable to recognize it. Uncomfortable, melancholy... He had noticed it throughout the past four days, the memories the clone constantly evoked with his familiar voice, his familiar face, his familiar habits of speech.

He missed Blake. He missed the Blake he'd known before Star One. He understood he was going to grieve for his loss even at the moment he realized there was nothing left to do but shoot Blake, and he knew Blake would never understand why he shot him, no matter how many times he tried to explain it to Blake's hypothetical ghost.

Since he already knew there was no way to explain it to Blake's ghost, he'd not spent much time thinking about it -- until now.

"All right, Avon," Blake said. "But perhaps we need to be clear about something right off. I promised to look after Imipak, and I mean to keep my promise."

Blake didn't mention the name of the man to whom the promise was made. Why should he? They both knew whom he was talking about. But it was interesting, all the same. The Blake construct claimed the name as his own, which was all very well and good -- except that some discomfort with the ambiguities of the situation clearly remained. Avon himself felt no discomfort, not on that subject. He had no difficulty referring to the Blake construct as Blake in fact.

"It really doesn't matter." There was no sense letting the relatively minor question of the weapon interfere by distracting Blake from whatever it was Avon had come to say to him. Always supposing he would be able to remember what that was. "About Imipak. I don't need Imipak. I'd take it if I could, but everyone will assume you are dead and I have it, no matter what we should decide to do about it between us. If you feel a need to keep it from me, I've no intention of arguing about it. Shouting just gives me a headache."

"What do you mean, doesn't matter?"

And, oh, he knew that outraged astonishment in Blake's voice. If only Blake had learned to take him at his word. He'd had two years; why hadn't he learned? He'd learned soon enough to take advantage of the fact that Avon spoke his mind. He'd learned to take advantage of the fact that Avon would not renege on his promised word. Why had he never been able to understand that the same singleness of purpose he used for his own ends was in effect when it addressed something Blake didn't want to hear? But Blake was still sputtering at him; he had to pay attention...

"What are you doing here, if you aren't after Imipak? Why should people assume that?"

Well, perhaps now was as good a time as any... "Because they know what you do not, that I have just come from killing Roj Blake. Some weeks ago, although I'm not quite sure of the exact chronology."

That had the predictable effect. At least, the effect Avon had predicted in his own mind -- the eyes that widened in surprise, then narrowed in concentration, the paling face that attested to the shock value of his claim.

Little enough trace in Blake's voice, however; only the mild suggestion of a threat behind his blatant request, too politely stated to be interpreted as an ultimatum. "Perhaps you'd better



tell me what you're talking about. It sounds as if more has changed than I imagined."

More true than the Blake construct could guess, just at present. "It's quite simple, when all is said and done. I don't intend to bore you with the details. I'm afraid Blake got knocked on the head one too many times; he lost his sense of proportion. We'd talked about the fact that it was time for him to leave me alone. But something happened to him; he couldn't quite bring himself to accept it. When I realized he had endangered my crew -- and his entire operation -- just to try and bring me back into the fold, it became clear the only thing to do was put him out of his misery before he betrayed any more of his previously held convictions. Unfortunately, I was too late to prevent his killing my people, and all of his, as far as I know."

Blake shook his head, slowly, as if the horror Avon could read in his eyes was near to paralyzing him. "I can't believe it. We spoke to him, on Gauda Prime. He sounded so confident, so completely in control. He was anxious to see you again. He was waiting for your arrival so he could start over again. There was no hint whatever that he questioned your willingness."

"He was insane."

Avon said it bluntly, flatly, as brutally as he could, hoping to make enough of an impact to get through to Blake. "I don't know when or how, although there were troublesome indications from the start. He was irrational when we attacked Central Control on Earth, but that wasn't a problem, not if it was just one instance. He was willing to destroy Star One in order to justify himself to himself, but I always suspected there was a problem on that account, and he was a man with a good deal of blood on his conscience. We agreed to go our separate ways at Star One. It's important that you understand that, because all the while I knew him, he was able to tell when the time had come to leave well enough alone."

There was a great deal more involved than Avon could communicate, at least under these circumstances. It would take all day to explain the correspondence between Blake and Travis, Blake's one really crucial area of misjudgement. Travis was the one who showed Avon what had happened; Travis was the one Avon saw during those last seconds.

Travis had been obsessed with Roj Blake, and Blake had never taken him quite as seriously as he should. Time and time again, he ignored Travis, let Travis slip through his fingers, failed to take the opportunity to destroy him when he had a chance. And because Blake never quite understood the nature of Travis's obsession, he fell victim to it, time and again.

Avon knew the face of obsession. He had seen the mask on Travis's face, and then again with Blake. Blake told the absolute truth when he said he'd been waiting for Avon. All those months, all that organisation, all the elaborate ruses and counter-ruses -- and all the while, Blake was waiting for him. Roj Blake would never waste so much time on any one man, not while in his right mind. Therefore, Blake was not in his right mind, and there was only one thing left to do, and that was to kill him before he got them all killed -- as he would surely do unless Avon put an end to it before it started. And even then, it was too late, too late already...

There was no one living, as far as Avon knew, who understood him better than Vila Restal had, but Vila was dead, and it was Blake's fault he was dead.

Poor, tender Dayna, trying so hard to be cold-blooded, studying so long to be heartless and



bloodthirsty, defeated in the end by her own instinctive protectiveness. His little Dayna was dead, and it was Blake's fault...

Soolin Macafee, an elegant child of the sword if there ever was one, that beautiful blonde ice-princess whose reserve gradually muted into cautious camaraderie and hesitant inter-reliance. Soolin was ruined, shot, murdered, and it was Blake's fault she was shot, Blake's fault Soolin's light had gone out of the cold world in which she lived so successfully for so long, Blake's fault her light was gone forever.

Tarrant, of course, Tarrant was a tiresome child, and Avon was fond of him even when he needed managing, and he was never tempted to discount the solid core of courage and decision that preserved Tarrant's life for so long. Tarrant came back for him, for Avon, made one last desperate attempt to salvage what he could, and Tarrant was shot when surely none of them deserved to die, and none of them had a chance to think about it...

They were all dead. Now, Avon wished Roj Blake was alive to appreciate what he had done, to suffer the remorse and guilt he deserved to suffer for the deaths of Tarrant and Soolin and Dayna and Vila, the deaths of all those other people who so foolishly put their trust in him. Blake deserved to be alive to suffer that, as Avon suffered; but since Blake was dead, since he was safely out of it, his construct would simply have to do.

That was it, then. That was part of why he had come. He expected to see the Blake construct suffer for Blake's crimes, and now he was here, he could see it wouldn't work after all. The Blake construct looked like Blake, and he sounded like Blake -- almost too much so for Avon's comfort. But the clone was not Blake, and could hardly be expected to react as Blake could be expected to, let alone suffer for what Roj Blake had done. That made as little sense as expecting Janel Sibbet to understand she was not Cally or Dayna or Soolin, and never would be. There was no logic to it whatever. So it was not going to work.

Avon set aside that line of reasoning now revealed to be so fatally flawed, and tried to pick up the thread of his conversation once more. What was he saying, before his dear, dead ghosts came up to distract him? Ah, yes. Imipak...

"And as far as Imipak is concerned, no one who knows of its existence will believe either that I have not killed you as well as Roj Blake, or that I haven't got it with me when I leave this planet. Therefore, the issue of whether or not I actually have Imipak becomes a non-issue. They will all believe I have it, and they will treat me as if I have it, and therefore, I might as well have it. The fact that I will not have Imipak becomes irrelevant."

"You'll understand, I hope, if I point out that I can hardly be expected to take a man at his word who has just confessed to a cold-blooded murder."

Suddenly, Avon felt for the Blake construct. There could hardly be a more difficult position imaginable, especially if -- as Blake had said -- they'd heard from Roj Blake recently, from Gauda Prime.

"I wouldn't describe it as cold-blooded myself. As I remember, I was rather the opposite at the time. I felt betrayed. I'd trusted him to realize it wasn't going to be the way he wanted. But that's history now, and I imagine it will all be public history sooner or later."

Blake shook his head again, as if in disbelief. As before. "All right, you didn't come for Imipak, and you've accepted hospitality, so I doubt you mean to kill me. What did you come



for? Why are you here? I thought Imipak was the answer, but now, I'm at a total loss."

And not only Blake. For whatever reason it might have been, now that he had come this far, now that he had reached the goal toward which he had driven himself these past days, he could not for the life of him remember the rest of what it was he'd thought he'd been after.

"Well, it seemed such an obvious move, I suppose." There was nowhere for him to go, not anywhere. Not back to Earth; there was nothing for him there. Not back to Xenon or to Gauda Prime. "At the time I chose this destination, I needed a bolt-hole where I could be reasonably certain the enemy would not think of looking for me, or not feel it worth the trouble. We almost didn't get down in one piece. Will that serve to answer your question?"

There was no reason why it should, really. The Blake construct leaned forward over the table, putting his head into his hands. "Don't ask me for a rational response, Avon, not so soon. Blake contacted us from Gauda Prime less than a year ago, just to check on our status. He asked if we needed anything. He sounded so confident. And you've just confessed to his murder. What do you expect me to do? How do you want me to react? Have you come all this way just to be forgiven?"

Avon stared, surprised and amused. Of all the things he'd turned over in the chaos of his thoughts, the concept of forgiveness had never even come up. "I don't particularly want to be forgiven, Blake. I've no hesitation in acknowledging what I've done. If there's anyone who should concern himself with the subject of absolution, it would be Blake, but he's dead, so it's all academic." Now the Blake construct had him doing it, too -- using the same name for the man who was dead and for the one who was alive and sitting in front of him. Confusing, perhaps, but effective.

The construct pushed himself away from the table, his palms turned outward in rejection and denial, his head pulled back defensively between his shoulders, his behaviour giving every indication of a man who had just heard too much, and more than he could assimilate and absorb at once. "No, I can't take any more, not just at present. Call if you should require anything. I'm going away now."

Blake was on his feet, backing out of the room in a flurry of confusion. Avon watched him go. There was silence in the wake of his departure. Avon looked at the plate of titbits, untouched, at Blake's full cup, unsipped, and in the resounding silence, Sibbet spoke.

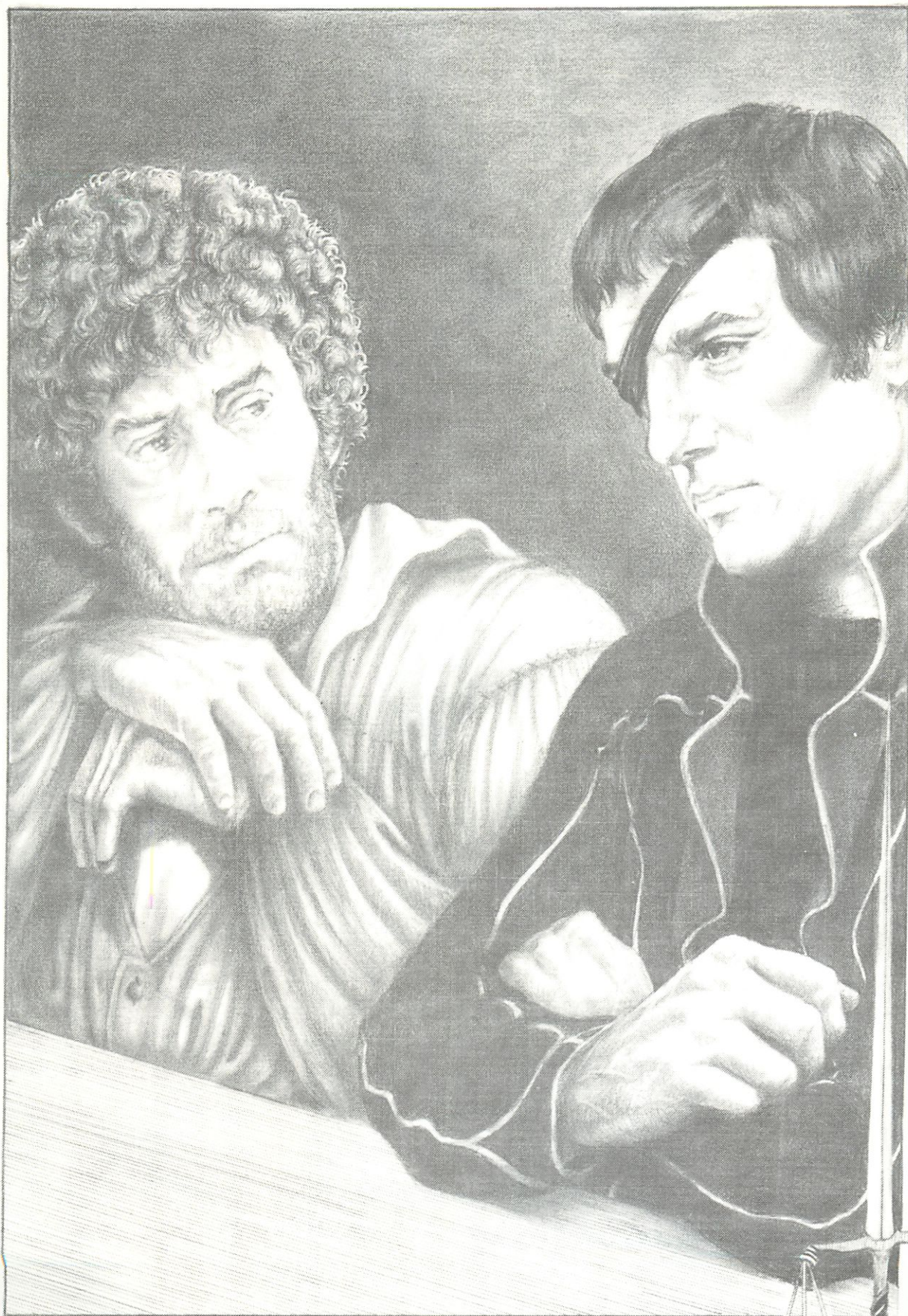
"It might be a good time for us to leave now, you know."

Something about her tone of voice clicked into place deep within him, recognition of that bone-dry and considered humour, almost too close to simple statement to be called humour at all. It was a simple statement; if challenged, she would always insist she'd had no humorous intent. Why, then, did he find it funny?

It was funny. Avon coughed, surprised at himself, then realized what he'd taken for a cough had been no cough at all. He was laughing. That hadn't happened for a while. He'd all but forgotten what it felt like.

"Not yet." The suggestion should be responded to, whether or not it had been presented for a joke. "We can't leave yet. He's not had his chance to make a noble gesture. It would be cruel to abandon him. He'll want the last word, surely, and I suppose we could let him have it, after all we've done to him up until now."





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"And you trust him not to forget about his principles and go get Imipak?"

"Well, you do have a point there, you know." It was only that there were some reservations in his heart about leaving without Blake having a chance to come to terms with what he'd had to accept himself. It had been hard enough for him to take after the fact, and the Blake construct didn't have the benefit of Avon's innate mistrustfulness to stand between him and absolute reliance upon Roj Blake. It could be said the Blake construct was childlike in that sense. Avon didn't want to leave him while he was still tender and smarting. "I'll make you a deal. If he's not back in thirty-six hours, we'll leave."

"I'd better go and check the weather station for the extended forecast," Sibbet said, and stood up. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

Her response was indirect, but still affirmative. Avon was satisfied. He liked a woman who didn't waste time arguing with him, who simply acted or declined to act as her inclination suited her. Sibbet was never one to waste words.

He only hoped he'd have the right words for Blake, when Blake came back.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the beginning, they weren't locked in. Janel and Avon had free run of the place -- by default, not given any particular tour beyond that necessary to locate the laundry and stores room and so forth, but not given any restrictions, either. There wasn't much to see of the base camp, beyond an endless array of featureless corridors distinguished only by stray bits of debris, the leavings -- from the obsolescence of the equipment -- of people who had built here, then abandoned the place. Nothing much to see, and at any rate, Janel preferred to stay close to the sledge, worrying at the guidance systems even as Avon was apparently absorbed in his bits of tinkering. She didn't trust him not to take it into his mind to get up and leave, abandoning her not so much by design as by failure to realize she was with him in the first place.

She hadn't quite decided yet why it mattered to her. The nearest she could guess was that, without her willing it, without her even noticing it above half, she had been in love with him for years, so there was no question but that she would follow him as long as he permitted it. It certainly wasn't a romantic attachment, and it had no particular sexual element that she could detect. It was simply as if some unspeaking knowledge at the core of her being belonged to Avon, and had always belonged to Avon, and would always belong to Avon even if she had never met him in this life.

At any rate, that was the nearest she could guess, and she guessed it by the irresistible and unconscious orientation of her heart, that ever and always tended in his direction, even under the most mundane of circumstances. There was certainly nothing particularly fulfilling about recognizing oneself as an adjunct to a half-blinded and near-ruined man who might, at the moment of epiphany, when these deep truths came near, be pissing against a tree trunk in the only somewhat removed vicinity. But it was as close as she had come thus far to explaining what she had done to herself, and she tried not to waste too much time puzzling it out, because she wanted to be sure to lay the new motivation system clean and straight before she had to shut the sledge's control box up again and chase out into the woods after Avon.

She almost had a chance to finish to her satisfaction, although she didn't start until after



Avon had his scene with Blake. A nasty scene it was, too, and while she hoped her absolute attachment to Avon did not mean she had entirely lost her ability to reason in matters that concerned him, she found herself more inclined than Blake to take his word for what happened and why he had done as he had.

She didn't know how many hours had passed since then; she was concentrating on her self-assigned chore. When the sharp knock at the door startled her into attention, she was surprised at the message of the chronometer. Eight hours? As much as that?

Avon sat at the table, his head tilted a bit over his project, as if to bring his eye closer to the problem. It gave his dark head quite the bird-like tilt; he reminded her of the raven, with the short, sharp movements of his head as he frowned and blinked and stared at the closed door.

"Yes?"

He sounded hoarse, rusty. Janel waited, but the voice on the other side of the door was female, and she hadn't even realized there was another person here. The surprise was enough to make her heart jump with the unpleasant shock of it all; she didn't like surprises, not under any circumstances, especially not now that she and Avon had made off with a Federation Commissioner's private yacht without so much as a note from her parent. Still, the voice beyond the door didn't seem to present any immediate threat.

"All right, you've had your discussion. Now I think you ought to come and finish what you've started. He's hardly spoken in eight hours. I don't like it. I won't have it."

Whoever the woman was, she sounded more worried than anything else, and perhaps a bit timid for all the bravado of her words. Avon turned to look at Janel, raising his eyebrow; she could almost laugh for the pity and the joke of it, to see an eyebrow raised where there was no longer any eye to give the gesture meaning. Instead, she decided to go to the door, opening it before the woman beyond could get much further in her plaintive demands. "I insist you go and speak with him. He's done you no harm, and a world of good besides..."

Janel opened the door.

The woman who stood beyond was a trifle taller than she was, and quite emphatically thinner, with a delicate face and a worried expression somewhat at odds with her matter-of-fact work clothes. Avon stood behind Janel; she could feel him, and he put his hand on her shoulder as much as if to ease her to one side and have a look as to make any proprietary gesture.

"You'd be Rashel, I expect." Whether consciously or not, his phrase seemed to echo that with which Blake had greeted them several days ago. "I've heard about you. What do you expect me to do about Blake's sulking? He always was a man for black moods, you know. From time to time, he could get quite morose."

"He's done well enough, until you came."

Janel couldn't quite tell if what she heard was exasperation, a hint of left-over defiance, or both. "Come with me, please. I don't like this. It worries me."

Avon shrugged, and Janel stepped aside to let him precede her over the threshold. Somehow, she doubted the woman Rashel had come to solicit her aid. They'd hardly notice her if she



followed along, so follow along she did.

This was a different part of the base. Seemingly undifferentiated, the bland, pocked doors gave gradually onto a rather more well-furnished area, bright and almost cluttered with all manner of salvage, a cheerful contrast to the spartan comforts of the guest area, which were ample but plain and utilitarian.

The woman hurried on before them, glancing back periodically with an expression of mingled anxiety and irritation, as if to reassure herself that they still followed.

Their goal was within a greenhouse of some sort, behind yet another heavy door, additionally shielded from the rest of the environment by a series of heavy semi-transparent moisture-barrier curtains. In her haste and her aggravated state of mind, Rashel seemed to fight her way through them, as if she felt their clinging protective function to be personally directed against her.

Once they were clear of the environmental shields, Janel had to stop in wonder, amazed at the world created within the station, a world so alien to the one outside.

It was near-tropical, a garden, full of moisture, warmth, the heavy green perfumes of jungle plants, and the raucous cries of birds with impossibly brilliant plumage, dimly glimpsed as they flew from branch to branch overhead. Clearly, this room -- or cavern, really -- was ten, twelve times more spacious than the others, higher by quite some metres.

Rashel looked back yet again, to check on their progress, and -- apparently understanding her confusion, although Janel would not guess at Avon's reason for stopping -- paused to give a welcome word of explanation.

"He collects them from the other side of the world, during the warm season. The aviary is his special project. Come on, it isn't much farther."

A well-marked path of deep brown gravel crunched clean and crisp beneath their feet. It led them down several turnings, deeper into the artificial jungle of the aviary. Finally, they came to a clearing at the heart of the jungle, a clearing with a few sculpted stone seats and an ornamental waterfall to furnish it -- and a very dour man indeed.

After a moment's hesitation, Avon went past Rashel, standing expectant and defiant at the edge of the clearing, and seated himself facing Blake. If it could be said a man with his head sunk so deeply on his breast could be faced at all.

"I didn't expect you to enjoy my recitation," Avon said. "But I can't say I expected you to go off and brood about it, either. I admit when I set out to come here, I wanted to punish Blake, and you were the next best thing. But it was a temporary condition on my part, and had passed by the time I sat down to talk to you."

There was silence, except for the music of the waters and the childish glee of bird-song. For long breaths, Janel puzzled over whether Blake had heard Avon at all -- or whether, having heard, he would deign to answer.

Finally, Blake unfolded himself from his self-absorption and straightened in his seat; Rashel sat down behind him, to one side. Where she could keep an eye on Avon, Janel supposed, wary of some further harm that might be done her partner.



"I don't particularly care why you came or what you wanted. Not any more." He certainly sounded surly enough -- except that there was an undertone of grief and resignation that ran deeper than Avon's flippant dismissal of his mood as sulkiness. "I'm only sorry you did come. I could have done very well without the tale you told me. Whether or not it is true -- and I'll have the truth of it sooner or later, Avon. You can be sure of that."

"There is no one to hunt you any longer, Blake. You are of no further importance to anybody. You are more free than I am. Surely that is worth an ugly story." And to Janel, Avon -- for all his casual attitude, for all the near-brutality of his words -- sounded sincere, sounded as if without his meaning it or wanting it to happen, he found himself personally involved with whether or not Blake could find some benefit in his story. "Since Blake is dead, you're no further threat to anybody. The story of your origins can be published easily enough. For myself, I'm still an irritation, I imagine."

Blake snorted, as if half angry, half derisive. "Oh, that must be a blow to an ego like yours, Avon. Merely an irritation? I am sorry to hear that."

The smile that surfaced on Avon's face started in his eyes -- in his eye -- before it travelled, softening the taut facial muscles into a mild, genial expression of recognition and affection that made him look years younger. "Yes, well, each of us must bear his own burden, after all."

How could it be affection Janel saw in his face? Affection for the man he had just confessed to having murdered on the grounds of what amounted to being inconvenienced? "But if you'll come out of your blue funk long enough to satisfy your lady, she'll let us go, and then you'll have that many fewer burdens to carry from now on. Is it agreed?"

Affection. Janel could not deny the identification, puzzle as she might over its source. Clearly, Avon had once been fond of Roj Blake. Clearly, this genetic construct reminded him of the Blake he'd once valued. But it made sense only if Avon were telling the truth about his reasons for killing the other Blake. Dispassionate and abstract, in the ultimate analysis Avon had shot and killed his friend because he felt the man who'd been his friend was already dead, with nothing left but a harpy-driven hull that would trouble him at his heels forever until he put an end to its misery.

Blake ran his hands through his shaggy hair, then buried his fingers in his beard. "I suppose there's no real reason for it. There isn't anything to be done now, after all. Where do you expect to go? That is, if you're still an irritation, I should think you'd want to stay where you can be safe from Federation scratching."

With Blake seeming to rouse himself from his brooding depression, Janel thought Avon relaxed in turn, and responded with more directness than she'd been able to get out of him. Of course, it wasn't as if she'd tried to nag him for information, not in so many words...

"It's not so simple for me, not any more. I used to think all I wanted was to be left alone in the lap of luxury, but I'm older than I used to be; caviar and champagne just keep me up all night. And I've discovered something disturbing about myself. I quite like reducing the Federation to quivering masses of frustrated impotence."

"You plan to go on as before, irritating the Federation? Are you quite sure it isn't simply a sublimated death-wish, this new determination on your part?"



Rashel seemed content, now that whatever crisis it had been was over. She stood up and moved around behind Blake to exit the area, and the clone watched her go.

"The only ultimate safety is to win. I don't propose to fulfill any hypothetical death-wishes. It's too much fun playing the game. Don't worry about me, Blake. I intend to have a perfectly hilarious time of it."

"And what about her?" Blake nodded in Janel's direction, and she froze in her seat, unpleasantly surprised. She hadn't expected to be involved in this discussion; she was only here to observe. "She's a wanted woman as well. Surely you don't mean to endanger her. It's not like you, to hazard other people. At least, not from what I was taught to think of you."

Avon turned his head to look at her, as if a little surprised to see there was someone there at all. "It wouldn't be the first time I've put Janel at risk. She'll leave when she's inclined, I suppose. To tell you the truth, I hadn't really thought about it."

He turned away again before he finished talking, leaving her to glare at his strong shoulders and to mutter to herself in the safe silence of her mind. Well, of course he hadn't thought about it. She was a technician, a tool for his use, and a man didn't think about whether or not his instruments were going to sprout wings and fly off, because inanimate objects usually didn't behave that way. He knew well enough that she was an animate object. But he would still think of her as an adjunct. Didn't she already understand that? Wasn't she happy enough to be with him, on his terms?

Then Avon said something else, something quite different from what she'd been thinking, something that stopped her frustrated meditation in mid-spate and shut off her angry feelings about whether she should be so taken for granted.

"I wouldn't like to have to think about it. I don't know how I'd have managed up till now without her. I suspect I'd not have made it here at all."

Was it really arrogance that made him treat her so casually, that kept him from drawing her into the troubles of his heart? Or was it diffidence, hesitation on his part, unwillingness to ask more of her when he was evidently keenly aware of how much she had already given up for him?

Blake nodded thoughtfully. "I can recognize the problem. Perhaps you ought to talk to her about it. You might be surprised. Well, if you came here to rouse me at Rashel's request, you can witness me roused from my contemplation. I suppose there isn't anything else to say at this point."

Avon stood up. "We'll want to start back to our ship. There's no reason to trouble you any longer. I imagine I really ought to threaten you to get you to produce Imipak, just for form's sake."

Now Blake laughed, as if the black mood that had been on him had completely passed away. "No threats are necessary. Imipak is all around you. See?"

He gestured with his hand. Janel, matching Avon's searching gaze, could see nothing that might correspond to this mysterious weapon. But Avon seemed to grasp something that had been unspoken.



"Plant hangers. Filtration for the pool, perhaps."

And Blake grew almost genial, closely approaching jollity. "It was rather a small weapon. Perfect for the catches on the ventilation system."

She had it now. They were saying Blake had disassembled the weapon, and used its components for mundane hardware. Well, that was one way to see it didn't fall into the wrong hands.

"You have the soul of a philistine, Blake. That weapon was a concept of abstract beauty..."

"And, being abstract, exists as much in the imagination as in reality, whether or not it is actually a collection of spare parts. Weren't you the one telling me it made no difference if you actually had Imipak? Well, it's too late in the day for you to leave now. Stay for the night. I'll set you on your road again in the morning."

On his feet and poised as ever for action, still Avon hesitated. "I had said I got what I came for. Yes. There's no sense in starting into the woods at sunset. Are you sure, Blake?"

Janel had lost the thread; she couldn't say what it was Avon wanted to know if Blake was sure about. But Blake seemed content that he knew.

"You wanted to tell Blake why you killed him, Avon, and you did. You needed a place of temporary refuge, and you got it. You decided it wouldn't hurt if the enemy believes you have Imipak, and they will. There's nothing else you want or need here, and if it's true that we're in no further danger from the Federation, it must also be true that I'm in no danger from you, for the same reason. Sit down and eat supper with us, both of you. We get so little company, Rashel and I... In fact, you're the only company we've ever gotten."

"You make it difficult to refuse," Avon told him. "Janel?"

There was that look again, that glance out of the corner of his eye, half of expectancy and half of blank inscrutability. And it caught her deep within her chest again, the way it always seemed to catch her when he met her gaze, as if the dark, fierce glitter of a hawk's eye beneath the proud arch of his occipital orbit carried a sharp, barbed hook within its depths that tangled ever and again amongst her heart-strings, and dragged the naked truth up to the surface of her mind each time, without her ever being able to resist or to resent his power over her.

"As you wish," she said. "As always, Avon."

Then there was that softening she had also seen before, the startling effect when Avon smiled and his whole face seemed to unmask itself, to reveal a gentle, even loving, man.

For two whole seconds. It was gone before he faced the Blake construct -- but she had seen it.

They'd not ruined him, the Federation. Try as they might, they'd succeeded only in creating a more dangerous enemy than he would ever have become if they'd left him to his own devices. They had driven him to such an extreme of frantic desperation that he had put out his eye to be free, but they'd not destroyed the man he'd been; they'd only laid the armour on, atop his sense of self. Even after all that had gone before, an unsuspected innocence of affection and



amusement remained, his own, unpoisoned by pain and betrayal, untainted by suspicion and intrigue. It was good to see, even if she could not expect to see it again any time soon.

"Thank you, dinner would be lovely," Avon said, formal and friendly at once, enjoying his joke. "But we will wish to get an early start in the morning."

"I'll go and tell Rashel. And I think we can manage an appropriate wake-up call. Don't go away, I shan't be more than a few minutes."

As if they were liable to go wandering, knowing nothing of the aviary and little about the route back to their quarters. Avon watched him leave, then turned to face Janel, not looking at her, studying the pool instead.

"Once we manage to get past that minefield, I can put you off on the nearest planet that strikes your fancy."

Either he still did not understand, or he preferred to pretend he did not understand, or he felt it more polite to decline to admit to understanding...

"Well, now, my set of standards for a planet that suits my fancy might require a significant search period before we could hope to find one. You may as well resign yourself to that."

He folded his arms. "I intend to involve myself in scandal, riot, and revolution. Not a very quiet life, I'm afraid. And not a very secure existence, if that's what you want."

"You're not listening. Why am I not surprised? You need me to remind you that there are always at least three ways in which disaster can occur that you have not thought of."

A particularly noisy bird with particularly brilliant and unlikely plumage flew across the little clearing, shrieking. Avon followed its passage with his head, and unfolded his arms again. "So be it." And finally, he looked at her, clear and direct, accepting -- if moderately confused. "I have it upon reliable authority that I can be difficult to live with."

"I can assure you, sir, that you are no good whatever at emotional scenes, and that I wouldn't have you any other way. Now, go and examine the furniture, please, before I lose my composure."

She was terrified at her own straightforwardness, terrified and relieved at once to have finally made a statement, however weakly and clumsily it had been done. He obediently turned away from her, and she stared down into the water for long moments, determined to maintain her face.

When Blake returned to carry them off to supper, Avon said, "Come along, then," and Janel followed after him, and everything that needed to be said had been said, and there was no more room for misunderstanding between them.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sledge was fully powered, waiting for their departure. Avon stood with Janel at the entrance to the base camp, looking out into the woods, thinking about the journey back to the yacht. He knew a better place to ford the river now, if Blake's maps could be trusted. It wouldn't be as long a trip, not as long as getting to the camp in the first place. It was



just as well. He had places to go and governments to destabilize, and he was rather itching to get on with it.

Janel was on his left side, where he could see her. "Sunrise in six minutes," she reminded him, almost gleefully. She knew he had been almost as inclined as she to let the moment chosen for their rising pass, to sleep later. Characteristic of her, to enjoy reminding him that both of them were still three parts asleep. "What are we waiting for? Sir."

That brought the smile to his face. After all that had passed between them, before the conclusive words exchanged the previous day, she still preserved the forms of their first acquaintance. "Blake wanted to see us off. And at the last minute, something occurred to him. He said he would be right back."

There was time to wait, after all. That was no real issue. She slouched against the outer wall of the base installation, and Avon stared into the morning, feeling the freshening of the wind against the blind side of his face. Sooner or later, he would have to fill the empty socket with some sort of substitute. The tear gland was still functional. Perhaps a bit of black-grained marble...

Blake hurried toward them down the long internal corridor, carrying something in his arms. The bird, Avon realized. Blake was carrying the bird, or at least one very much like the carrion rook that had brought him to them once before.

"Here," the construct said, and held the creature out. Avon received it gingerly in his two hands. It did not appear to much care for the handling, and looked rather indignant. "It's been pining for you, Avon. It would be cruel of me to deprive it of your presence. And those studs... It's Rashel's idea, really."

Avon looked at the bird. There had to be more to it; Blake sounded far too pleased with himself. "I hadn't thought to take away your pet," he protested dubiously. "I'm sure it would be much happier in its natural environment..."

"Trust me on this, Avon. It will do quite well on shipboard. This bird was raised from an egg by Rashel. It's not suited for the wild, not since they flock by preference. And it is what you came for, in a way. You see, she's given them all names."

It still wasn't clear to Avon. Obviously, there was more to the joke.

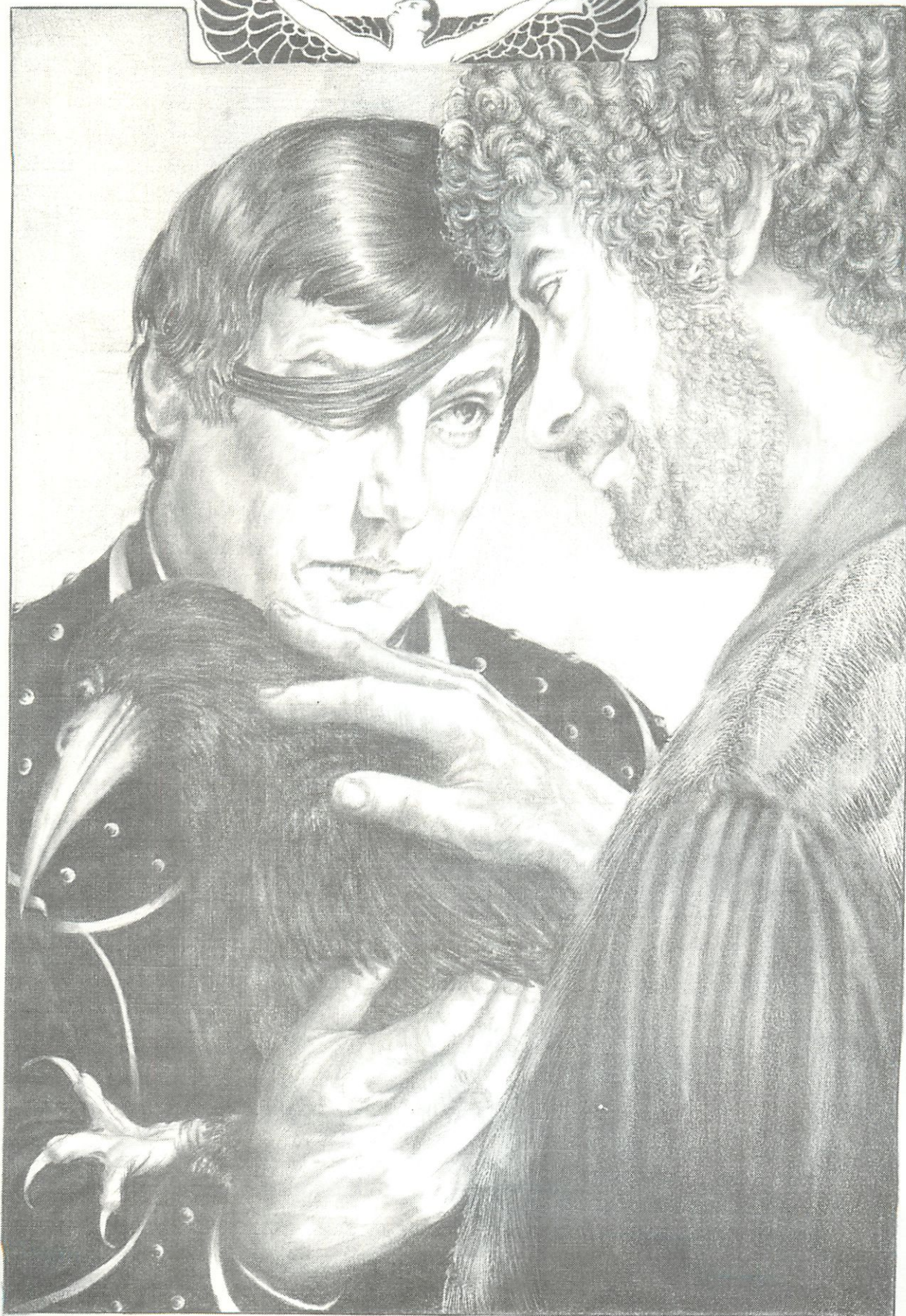
He set the bird down between his feet. It stalked solemnly over to the sledge, and flew up the short distance to perch there. "If you insist, Blake. But I did not come to carry away a memento of our meeting. I'll have to adjust to the idea."

"You came for Imipak. Well, there it is. The bird's name is Imipak. Take it with you, and then you will have Imipak with you in fact."

It was a simple joke, worthy of an innocent, naive pair. Simple, but perhaps as apt as any other joke, for all its childish innocence and sincerity.

"Well... And you said I couldn't have Imipak. We'll be going, Blake. There's light to travel by, and we've some days' walk yet ahead of us." There had to be something more to say; he couldn't leave Blake on so formal a note, not when he would never see him again. "I'm sorry we brought such unpleasant news for you. My thanks, our thanks, for your hospitality."







Blake just smiled, and stepped back, to stand within the corridor and hold up his hand in farewell. "There isn't any easy way to say goodbye, Avon. Go in peace. Go in peace, lady."

He dropped his hand to the control at the doorpost, and the door slid shut, separating them.

Well, that was one way of doing it, Avon supposed. Janel pushed the sledge's motivator into its programmed mode; once it started moving, they had little choice but to follow it or lose it.

"Back to the yacht?" she asked, but it was hardly a real question.

"Back to the yacht," he replied. The bird -- Imipak -- took flight from the sledge, out ahead of their line of travel, into the trees. Avon started forward, conscious of Janel on his left, following him.

So it was finally over. Finished.

Whatever might come, it would be different.



BROTHER OF SHADOWS...AND SON OF THE LIGHT

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